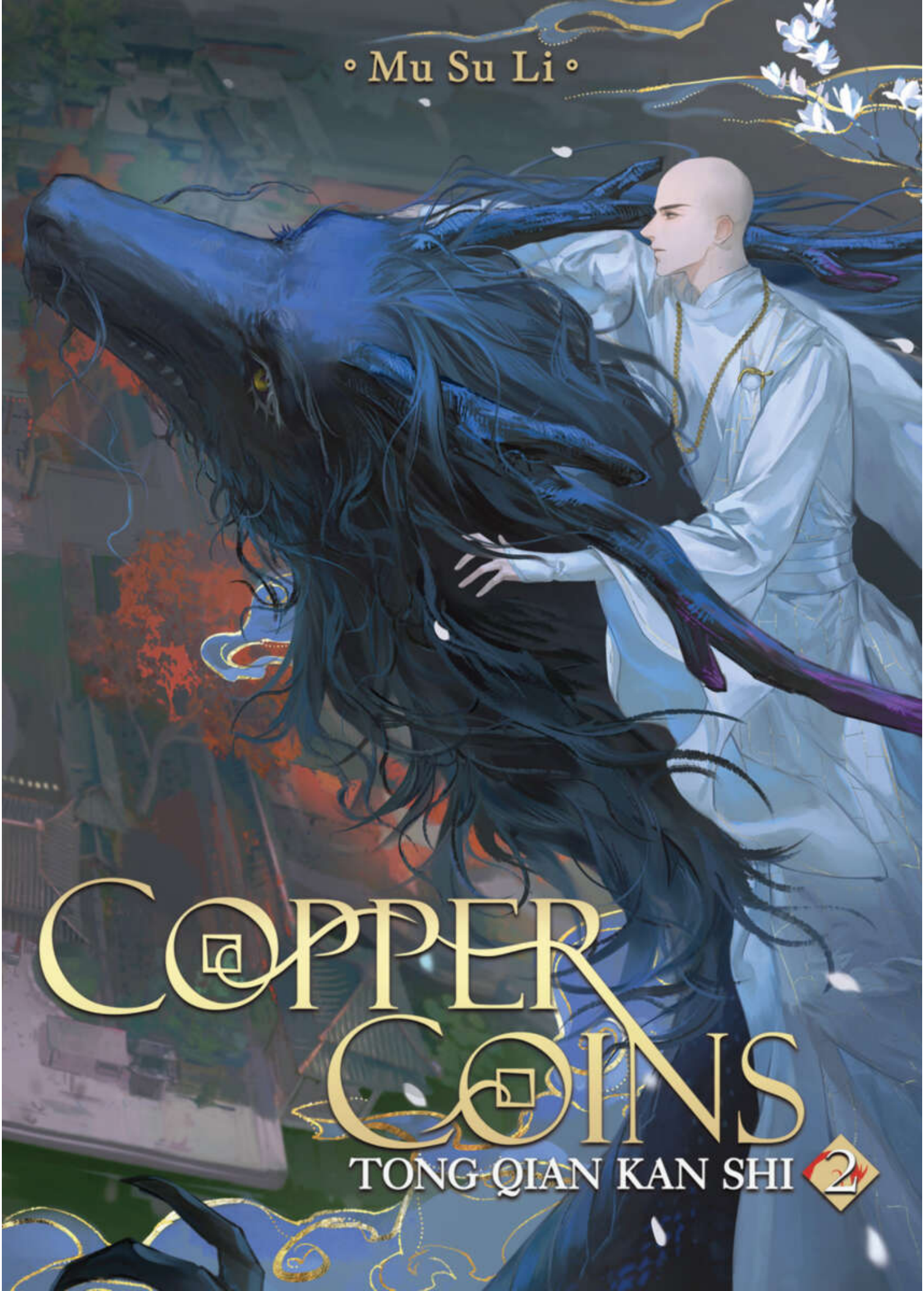
• Mu Su Li •
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TONG QIAN KAN SHI 2

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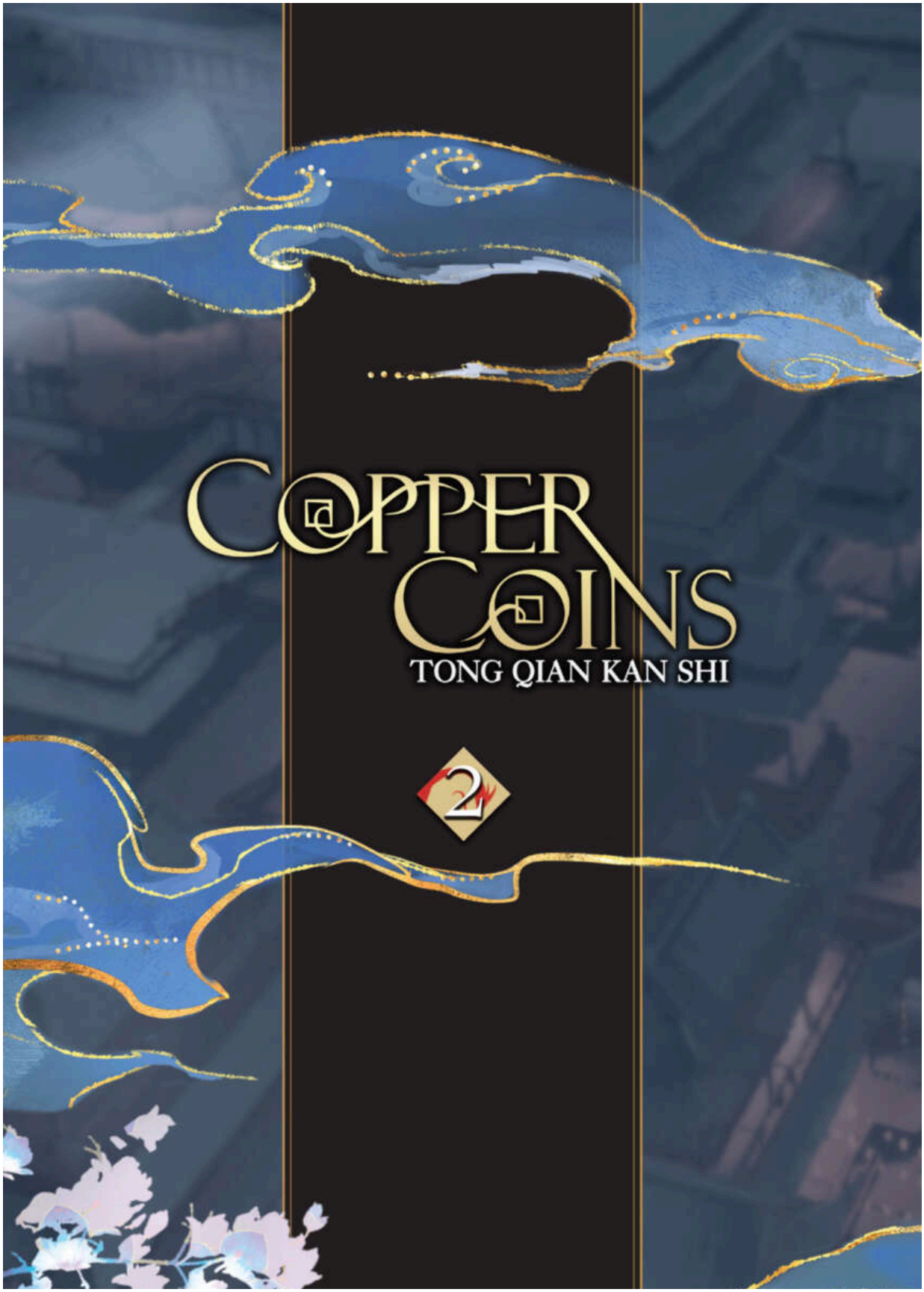
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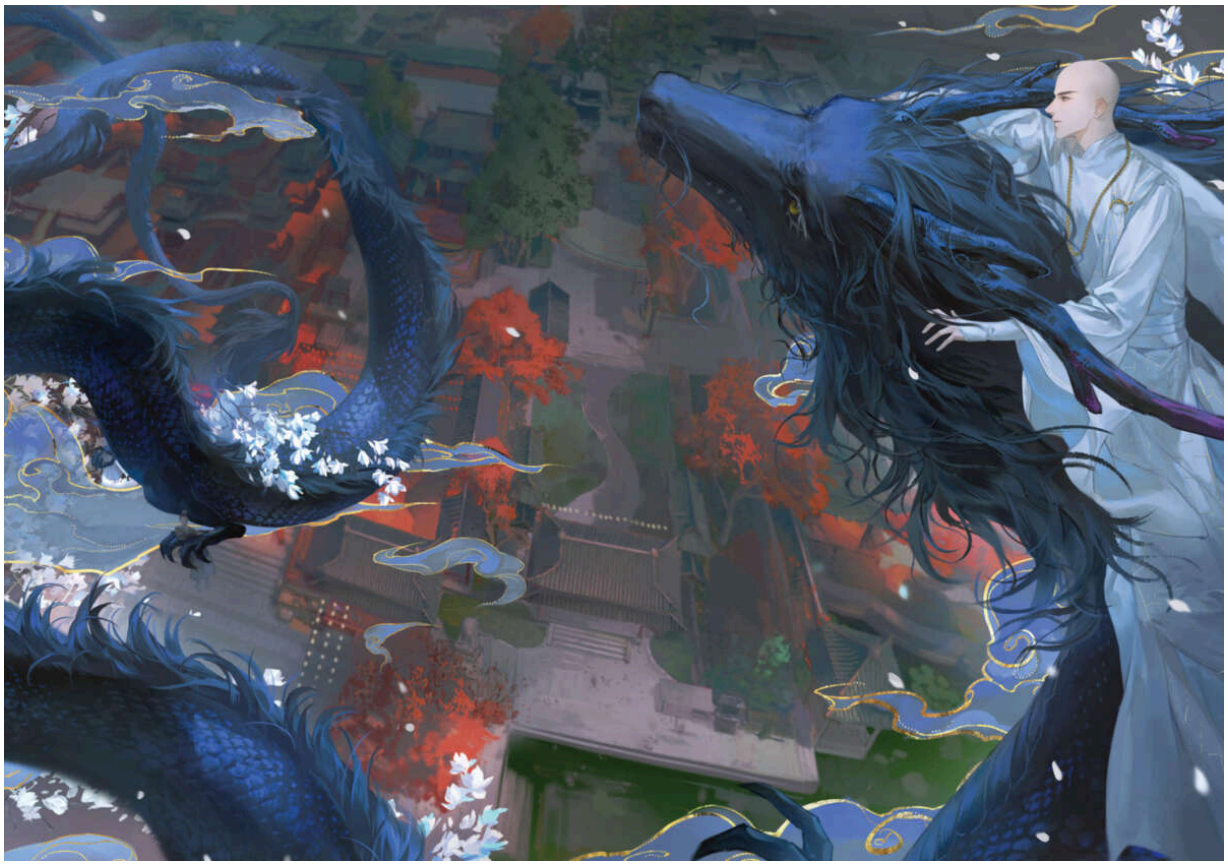

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Seven Seas

Seven Seas Entertainment

Copper Coins: Tong Qian Kan Shi (Novel) Vol. 2

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PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89561-084-8
Printed in Canada
First Printing: December 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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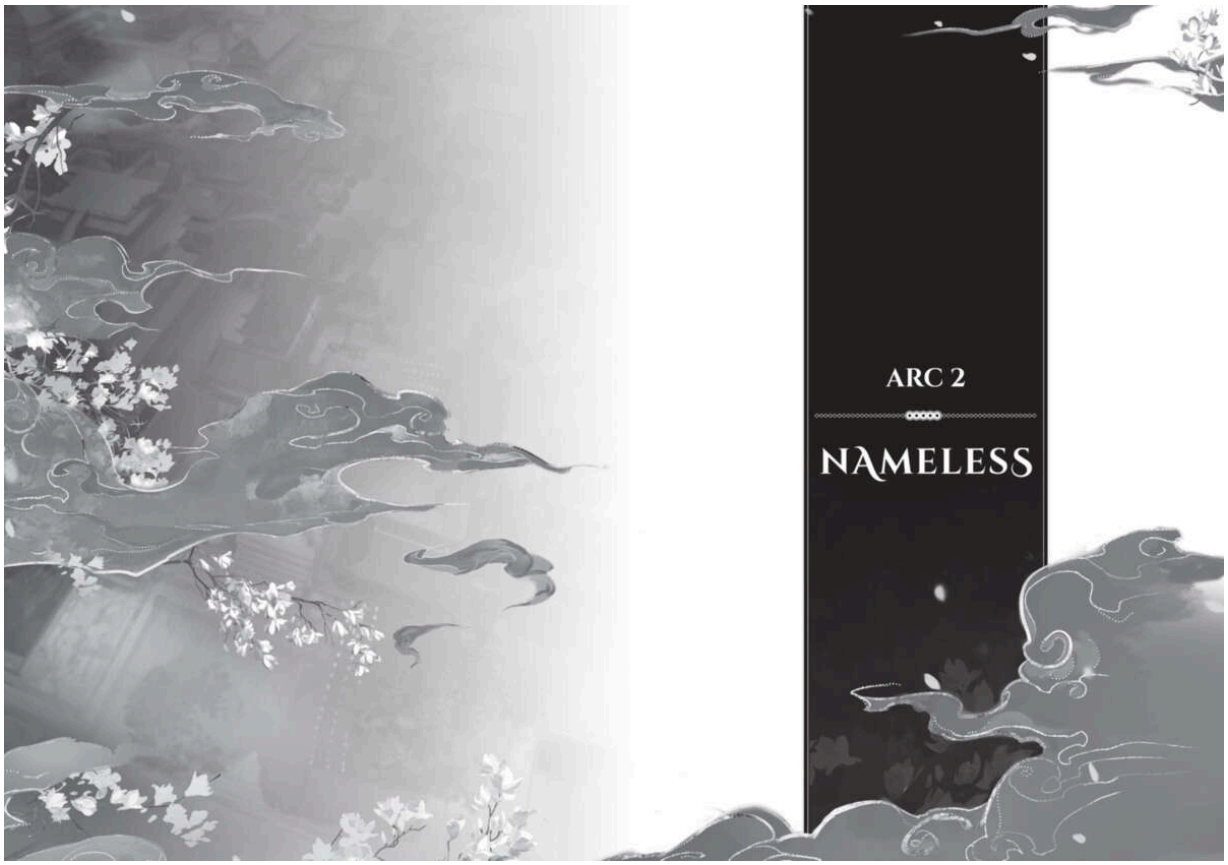
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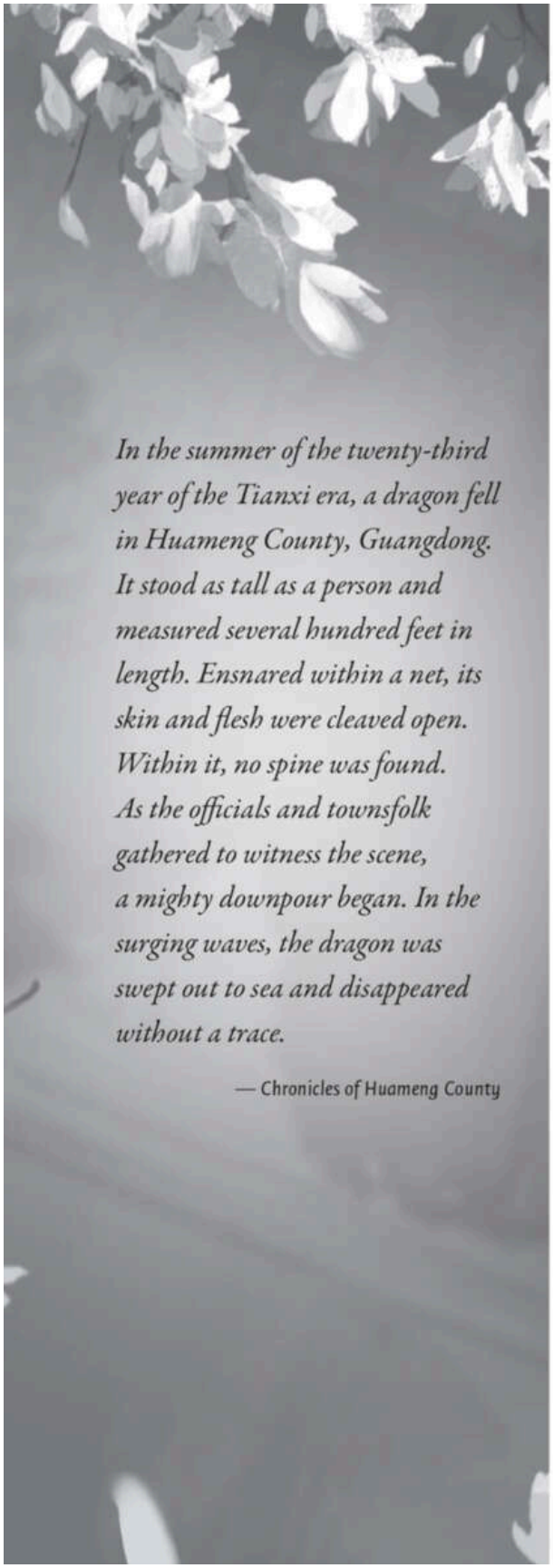


In the summer of the twenty-third year of the Tianxi era, a dragon fell in Huameng County, Guangdong. It stood as tall as a person and measured several hundred feet in length. Ensnared within a net, its skin and flesh were cleaved open. Within it, no spine was found. As the officials and townsfolk gathered to witness the scene, a mighty downpour began. In the surging waves, the dragon was swept out to sea and disappeared without a trace.

— Chronicles of Huameng County

Chapter 15:
Shitou Zhang

LUOMEI STREET WAS Wolong County's busiest avenue. Its name came from the red plum trees planted between the houses and buildings lining both sides. During winter, especially on snowy days, the scarlet petals of the plums fell onto the white snow, dotting the entire street with specks of red. This gorgeous, scenic view had become one of Wolong County's most famous attractions, hence the name Luomei—falling plums.

The area boasted inns, pawnshops, eateries, and wine houses, along with a variety of other shops. There were several silk and fabric stores nestled between the cosmetics and jewelry shops.

Xue Xian was difficult to please. He didn't want to be seen by passersby as he coiled around Xuanmin's wrist, but he also didn't want his face entirely covered by the wide sleeve. He insisted that the monk adjust it just enough to show his eyes, but then he would stretch and move his head and tail, mussing the sleeve. He had to badger Xuanmin into fixing it constantly.

What well-adjusted person would walk down a road while fiddling with their sleeve over and over? Xuanmin humored Xue Xian with a few words at first, but as the dragon grew more restless, Xuanmin glanced down and shook out his sleeve to cover Xue Xian entirely.

No matter how Xue Xian thrashed around on Xuanmin's wrist, Xuanmin didn't let him out again.

Xue Xian lay still in the dark for a while, then began leaving bite marks on each of Xuanmin's fingers, from the thumb to the little finger. Eventually, he clamped down and refused to let go. Xuanmin's finger twitched a few times, but to no avail.

In the end, Xuanmin decided to carry on as if his fingers were unbitten.

Xue Xian wasn't even that upset. He had a bad temper and was accustomed to throwing his weight around, so he never reined himself in, but that didn't mean he'd fly into a rage over *every* trivial thing. He just wanted to provoke Xuanmin. When they'd first been getting to know one another, Xue Xian had been driven by the indignation he'd felt when Xuanmin had captured him. Over time, his constant mischief became habitual, as if he couldn't feel at ease without causing trouble for Xuanmin. Though they'd faced danger together and Xue Xian's initial resentment had faded, he couldn't resist acting out from time to time. Perhaps it was because Xuanmin, unlike anyone Xue Xian had ever met, was absurdly calm and detached. He itched to provoke the monk, to see what he would look like when he lost his composure.

Could be I'm just bored and looking for some amusement at the bald donkey's expense, Xue Xian thought.

Such moments of fleeting self-reflection were almost unprecedented for this particular wise one. They usually only happened when he was full and had nothing better to do, or when he was ravenously hungry.

Xue Xian thought hunger was probably the culprit this time. He lazily lowered his head, watching the tip of his tail swaying with Xuanmin's steps.

"Bald donkey, you still owe me a meal," Xue Xian grumbled.

Not in the habit of muttering to himself in public, Xuanmin didn't reply. To his surprise, Xue Xian loosened his grip on Xuanmin's little finger. With a shift of his claws, he began scuttling up Xuanmin's wrist, right for his collar.

"Can't hear me?" he said as he climbed. "Then I'll say it into your ear."

Xuanmin blinked. Xue Xian's claws, much like his scales, had softened considerably. They caused no pain when they hooked onto Xuanmin's hand, but they did tickle him. This was tolerable when he wasn't moving, but once he started walking… Well, it became rather irritating. Xuanmin frowned. The fingers hidden in his sleeve pinched the evil spirit's unruly tail and yanked him back down.

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes and dug into Xuanmin's arm, scoring a long line of claw marks as he was dragged downward.

Xuanmin's frown deepened as he turned his full focus to Xue Xian. "Since when did I owe you a meal?" he asked in a neutral voice.

A passing pedestrian, wondering if the monk talking to himself was a bit off in the head, shot Xuanmin a strange look. However, the icy aura radiating from Xuanmin intimidated the stranger; he hastily lowered his head and scuttled away.

Xue Xian felt a surge of resentment.

"When you barged into the Jiang family clinic, you ruined my meal. That bookworm went to the eatery at the crack of dawn to buy it for me and almost collapsed from exhaustion bringing it back. Those were their signature dishes! You can't find that flavor anywhere else. I paid for it, but I

didn't even get to enjoy two bites before you ruined it. Don't you feel even a *bit* guilty? Shouldn't you make it up to me?"

His reasoning was sound, his arguments well-rounded. Could anyone say no to him? If they did, he'd turn the world upside down!

Spotting a clothing shop ahead—and noticing how everyone who walked past seemed to duck—Xuanmin decided against saying more. He replied with a nonchalant "Mm," turned on his toes, and entered the shop.

The owners were a middle-aged couple. The man was busy clacking away on an abacus, while the woman held a copper hand warmer in her arms, her head bowed as she wove what looked like an intricately designed knot.

Xuanmin's steps were silent, and his robes gleamed white like clouds or snow. He might have cut an ethereal figure, but it was also easy to mistake him for someone in mourning at first glance. When his white silhouette lashed in the corner of the lady shopkeeper's eye, a jolt went through her still-weaving hands.

"Oh, heavens, you scared me!" she exclaimed, patting her chest as she looked up. When she saw that the newcomer was a young monk, she froze for a moment, her expression shifting to something uncertain.

It was deep in winter, and few were out and about. Moreover, the day had been overcast since the morning, and there had been rumors of a strange, thunderous downpour by the river earlier, complete with towering white waves. With dark clouds looming overhead once more, the few pedestrians on the streets further quickened their pace. The couple's shop had yet to make a single sale that day. They finally had a customer, only to discover it was a monk. What good was a monk?

The lady shopkeeper automatically looked at Xuanmin's hands. He wasn't carrying an alms bowl, so he wasn't there to beg. However, her expression didn't brighten much. Monks held a somewhat peculiar status these days thanks to the current state preceptor.

Everyone knew the state preceptor was a monk and an exceptionally powerful one at that. Rumors spoke about his extraordinary abilities, that he was capable of overturning the heavens with a flip of his hand. Most importantly, he'd lived for a long time—so long that no one could say for certain just how old he was. He'd served five generations of emperors, and his tenure as state preceptor alone spanned over a century.

Ordinary citizens could see the state preceptor at most once a year, during the annual Winter Solstice ceremony at Mount Tai. A grand procession would travel from the capital to the foot of the mountain, and townsfolk along its path could catch a fleeting glimpse of the man, though they had to be discreet about it. The state preceptor always wore a silver beast mask, while his voluminous robes and crimson kasaya concealed his hands and feet. His face remained hidden, making his age impossible to discern.

Some swore that he wasn't human at all. They said that, though his face and limbs were hidden away, looking at his neck was enough to prove he wasn't an old man. When people aged, wrinkles that were impossible to hide formed on their necks. Living a long life was one thing, but living over a century without any signs of aging? That was downright terrifying.

Others claimed they'd seen the state preceptor during a procession, and his neck *had* shown wrinkles then. Still, they didn't think he looked elderly—more like a middle-aged man. Another group believed that the

state preceptor had been replaced multiple times over the years, but the mask kept anyone from noticing.

In any case, opinions varied, and it was difficult to separate truth from fiction. Commoners always held a certain reverence for the mysterious and the unknown.

However, the state preceptor was not only enigmatic in appearance and age; his personality was also said to be eccentric and mercurial. Rumors about him abounded in the capital. Some said that he was currently observing a vow of silence. He'd ceased speaking, his demeanor as cold as the snow on Mount Tianshan. His attendants were left in a constant state of anxiety, unsure whether they were doing the right thing or not. There were also claims that he practiced the dark arts: Every few years, he'd take in a wise and promising child or two, only for them to vanish without a trace. Some speculated that they'd been transformed into medicinal puppets or other sinister creations. At times, it was said, a faint scent of blood lingered around his residence. The spine-chilling tales left people too frightened to imagine the details.

These rumors had no clear source. After all, no one dared to gossip about the state preceptor using their real names. Those who'd publicly opposed him in the past had all met untimely ends. *That* had only made the commoners more inclined to believe the rumors.

Moreover, although the state preceptor had quelled many natural and man-made disasters, each time he resolved a crisis, strange events followed. This only deepened the people's fear of him, and many considered him a demonic monk. They feared that he might succumb to some dark ailment one day and then no one would be able to control him.

He had been notably absent from this year's Winter Solstice ceremony. Some claimed he'd met with a great disaster and been forced into secluded cultivation. At best, he was dealing with some thorny issues, and at worst, his absence from the ceremony suggested a life-or-death situation. Perhaps his lifespan was nearing its end. The common folk secretly rejoiced at this possibility.

Decades ago, before the rumors about the state preceptor had spread, the populace had treated monks well and temples across the nation had overflowed with incense. Once the rumors began to circulate, however, the reputation of monks became somewhat negative. When people needed rituals performed or evil spirits exorcised, they grudgingly sought out temples for assistance. Still, most people preferred not to interact with monks and avoided them altogether on an average day.

Now that one had come to their tailor's shop, they couldn't just turn him away—and Xuanmin was rather handsome. When the lady shopkeeper's gaze swept over his face, her expression softened a little. She set her knot on the counter and rose to greet him.

Why would a monk come to a tailor shop for monk's robes? she wondered.

"Shifu, are you here to…purchase some garments?"

Xuanmin offered no explanation. "Mm" was all he said before scanning the clothing on the display.

The lady shopkeeper clutched her hand warmer. This monk was acting so coldly she couldn't find it in herself to be warm toward him. She nudged her husband, who was still clacking away on the abacus.

“Stop fiddling with that thing. We’ll handle the calculations later. Go attend to our guest.”

Her husband was the languid type. He rubbed his lower back and looked up.

“What kind of style are you looking for, young shifu?” His speech was slow and measured. “We’ve never made monk’s robes in our humble shop before, but if you need one, we can have one tailored for you overnight. We’ll just need to take your measurements.”

“No need,” Xuanmin replied.

The lady shopkeeper stared. Always with the one- or two-word answers—how was she supposed to conduct business like this?

It was clear that Xuanmin had never set foot in a shop like this before, and he seemed like a wandering ghost standing there in his white robes. He didn’t bother to pick and choose; he just casually rifled through the sleeves of a few nearby winter overcoats. He glanced at their lengths and roughly recalled the height of Xue Xian’s human form, intending to pick a few items at random.

The dragon coiled around his wrist wasn’t having it.

“That thing’s thick enough to block gaps in city walls,” complained Xue Xian. “If I wore that and I’d be rolling on the ground like a ball. I don’t want it. Buy it and wear it yourself!”

He knew he couldn’t be too unruly in the shop, so he kept his voice down, the words muffled as they traveled through the folds of Xuanmin’s robes.

The lady shopkeeper held her hand warmer tighter and studied Xuanmin for a moment. Her gaze traveled from his hands to the winter coats. Suddenly, she understood.

"Are you buying these for someone else?"

"Mm," said Xuanmin, still focused on the clothing.

"Do you have any preferences or requirements?" the lady shopkeeper asked. "If I may ask, who are you buying it for? We might be able to recommend a few items."

Xuanmin's gaze fell on a particularly garish overcoat. Its colors were bright enough to make anyone's eyes bleed. Recalling Xue Xian's ability to throw a fit over every single little thing, Xuanmin offered a concise description: "Someone who chases people around like a pheasant and pecks at them."

Neither Xue Xian nor the lady shopkeeper knew what to say to that.

The easygoing shopkeeper pointed at the lurid coat, his eyes squinted in a perpetual smile. "Shifu, the one in front of you is quite nice. Bright colors and a fresh design."

The jacket was a mishmash of colors, as if it had been stripped straight off a pheasant. It was, indeed, a perfect match.

"You must have a death wish," Xue Xian muttered venomously.

When Xuanmin placed his silver on the counter, the lady shopkeeper's mouth twitched.

This monk must not leave his temple much, she thought. *He's completely clueless about market prices.* In this county, buying a house cost

just over twenty taels of silver. Who would throw that much money at just three pieces of clothing?

Without comment, her husband picked up a small copper scale to weigh the silver and instructed his wife to count out the change for Xuanmin.

As Xuanmin rested his hand on the counter, Xue Xian happened to notice a half-finished knot lying there. He stared at the knot for a moment, then poked Xuanmin with his claw. While the couple was distracted, he swiftly climbed up to Xuanmin's neck.

"Now this is a surprise. Look at that knot. Doesn't it resemble the pattern carved at the base of the stone lock?" Xue Xian whispered.

That stone lock was hefty, so carrying it around everywhere was impractical. Xuanmin had borrowed some simple tools from the Lu family to make a rubbing of the pattern at its base instead. Since Xue Xian spent so much time in Xuanmin's pouch that he practically treated it as his own nest, he stuffed it with anything and everything, including the paper with the rubbing and the iron tags he'd pulled from the riverbed. Fortunately, they were all small and lightweight items. Otherwise, Xuanmin's monk's robes would have been torn open.

Xuanmin coolly pulled the paper from his pouch and compared it to the knot. The pattern on the paper was strange and resembled a totem. It was a circular design with a clawed creature perched on top—a bat or something similar, perhaps—and swirling cloud patterns below.

Of course, a woven knot couldn't look exactly like a carving. The carved creature had a primitive ferocity to it, while the woven knot was

rounded and much gentler. At first glance it wasn't a perfect match, but closer inspection proved them quite similar.

Xuanmin and Xue Xian had never seen such a pattern before and were prepared for a difficult investigation, but to their surprise, they'd already made some progress.

"What is this knot used for?" Xuanmin asked. He put the paper away and tapped the counter.

The lady shopkeeper had been counting out copper coins as per her husband's instructions. "Oh, it's a blessing knot for peace and good fortune." Upon raising her head, she noticed Xuanmin's expression. "Not something you see often, right? I learned this pattern a few years ago. I haven't seen it anywhere else, but it really works. My son's avoided quite a few disasters wearing it, though the knot itself keeps breaking."

"Where did you learn the pattern?"

"From Shitou Zhang's wife," the lady shopkeeper replied. Realizing that Xuanmin might not be a local, she elaborated, "Shitou Zhang is a famous stonemason in our county, known for his exquisite craftsmanship. Quite a few officials from the capital have invited him there. His wife is fairly talented herself and enjoys weaving beautiful trinkets. I learned it from her."

Shitou Zhang? Shitou—*stone*. Xue Xian thought of the stone lock submerged in the river. Stone here, stone there. It was not just a coincidence, surely.

Xuanmin had picked up on it too. He picked up the wrapped clothes as well as the copper coins. "Where does this Shitou Zhang live?"

“Head east along the street and turn into Hugua Alley. There’s a pile of stone material in front of the gates.”

Huizhou Prefecture was renowned for its carvings. Many came here looking for skilled artisans to carve all sorts of trinkets, so the lady shopkeeper found nothing suspicious about his queries and readily told him the answer.

Unlike Xue Xian, Xuanmin had no problem with directions. A couple of turns later, he arrived at Hugua Alley. The lady shopkeeper’s description was apt, and the residence jumped out right away. Standing at the entrance of the lane, he saw a compound with a small mountain of stone materials piled near the gates.

He walked up to the gates and knocked with the brass knocker. However, there was no response from within.

“Are you also here to see Shitou Zhang, young shifu?” a middle-aged man asked as he walked by. “He’s not home. I live next door, and his place has been empty for over half a month. It’s always dark and silent inside. Maybe some out-of-town official invited him for a job again.”

The man continued on, muttering to himself. “But his wife hasn’t been home either. Perhaps they’re out visiting their relatives?” He paused. “Who knows! In any case, knocking won’t help. Several groups have come looking for him over the past two weeks, and they all left empty-handed. You might want to come back another time.”

He glanced at the sky and hurried off without another word, quickly entering the gates of a nearby compound.

Xuanmin watched the man go before turning away. He remained

outside Shitou Zhang's gates, his arms loose at his sides.

Xue Xian was feeling uncomfortably cooped up and twitched his claws. Seeing that no one was around, he poked his head out of Xuanmin's sleeve and gulped down some fresh air.

Xuanmin brushed at Xue Xian's slender tail with his fingers and frowned. "Why are you suddenly burning up?"

"I'm not just hot—I feel bloated too," Xue Xian replied. His long tongue hung limply from his half-open mouth. He looked almost lifeless.

The sensation was a familiar one. The last time he'd experienced it was on Fentou Island, which had led to him reclaiming his true form at last. Now that the feeling had resurfaced, there was no way he could ignore it.

With his tongue still lolling, Xue Xian slurred to Xuanmin, "Do me a favor and either break down the door or climb over the wall. There's something hidden in that guy's house.

"And once we're inside, find an empty room to put me down in. Bring the new clothes with you," Xue Xian added after a moment's thought.

Xuanmin already had a hand on the gate of the Zhang residence, but he paused. "Why?"

Xue Xian chuckled dryly. "My body's swelling so much that I might not be able to maintain this form. If I don't transform into a human, I'll revert to my true form, and half of Wolong County will be flattened. You'll end up as a pancake, little monk."

Xuanmin blinked.

Whether Xuanmin in particular would end up as a pancake remained to be seen, but Xue Xian found himself being dragged into the Zhang

family courtyard by the tail regardless.

"If it weren't so uncomfortable, you'd be getting pelted by thunderbolts right now," Xue Xian threatened.

He probably meant to look menacing, but with his head spinning from the heat, his words came out listless and whiny. Even his attempts to bare his claws resulted in only ineffectual twitching. He wasn't intimidating in the slightest. Xuanmin had been half unconscious back in the river and missed Xue Xian's majestic ascent into the clouds. Looking at this skinny, puny dragon now, it was hard to imagine him as a fearsome creature.

Xuanmin had planned to enter the compound and find a random room in which to set the tiny dragon down, but once he actually stepped into the courtyard, he changed his mind.

Xue Xian was so overheated that he'd lost all sense of time, and his mind was in a fog of confusion. He noticed that Xuanmin had stopped just inside the gate. Perhaps he'd seen something and was assessing the situation, for he made no move to proceed further. The grip on Xue Xian's tail released, and Xuanmin placed him back on the bony jut of his wrist. However, Xue Xian's claws were weak and unable to keep their grip. He couldn't even lift his head, let alone coil himself around Xuanmin's wrist. The moment he was placed there, unable to hold on, he began sliding down Xuanmin's hand.

At least Xuanmin's skin proved to be cool. Though Xue Xian seemed about to burst into flames, he found some relief pressing himself to it.

After slipping down twice, Xue Xian felt Xuanmin pull him elsewhere—he was now cradled in Xuanmin's palm, preventing him from falling to the ground. Palms tended to be warmer due to their link with the

fire within the heart. Xue Xian squirmed a few times, finding this spot less pleasant than Xuanmin's wrist, and drowsily sought to move elsewhere.

Drawn instinctually to the coolest area possible, Xue Xian soon wound himself around Xuanmin's fingers and wove through the gaps between them. Xue Xian snaked around the root of each finger, capitalizing on every bit of coolness he could find. The tip of his tail dangled from Xuanmin's little finger, and his head pressed against Xuanmin's thumb. The soft scales of his belly and back brushed against Xuanmin's skin.

Xuanmin frowned slightly and glanced downward. When he saw Xue Xian's drowned-worm appearance, he sighed in resignation and let him be.

Shitou Zhang was a stonemason through and through, and his courtyard was crowded with even more stones than the area outside the gate. Heaps of rocks of varying sizes and heights almost encircled the yard, leaving only a small gap by the entrance just wide enough for one person to squeeze through.

As for why Xuanmin had paused after entering the courtyard—these were no ordinary stones. With the exception of a few unfinished or discarded pieces, most of the stones in the yard had been carved into mythical beasts. Xuanmin scanned them, identifying a single-horned animal resembling a deer or horse known as a tianlu, a beast resembling a lion or tiger called a bixie, and a thick-maned, hornless creature known as a taoba. Every single one was a fierce beast with the power to dispel evil and misfortune.

Shitou Zhang's craftsmanship was extraordinary; his statues were both exquisite and lifelike. The larger ones stood as tall as a person, and the smaller ones were about waist-high. Some were gazing down while others

stared straight ahead, some had their eyes half closed, and others remained wide-eyed. All of them faced the gate. Between these stone beasts were crammed smaller statues of coiled tortoises, celestial dogs, and the like. The sculptures were packed so densely the effect became almost stifling. Most people stepping into the courtyard would probably be scared out of their wits at the sight. Whether they could actually ward off any evil wasn't clear, but they'd certainly work for scaring people away.

That was the real odd part. It was normal for a stonemason living off his craft to showcase some of his sculptures and skills, but to choose a display so terrifying? That truly gave one pause.

Xuanmin scrutinized the moss-covered stone slabs beneath the statues, then reached out to touch the nearest sculpture. The moss on the stone slabs suggested that these statues hadn't been placed here for long—maybe just a month or two. Some of the sculptures were newly carved, and though they appeared robust and lively, the details suggested they'd been crafted in haste. If the goal was to attract visitors, such hastily finished pieces would never have been given such a prominent display.

"Why are you just standing there like an idiot?" Xue Xian mumbled. "I'm about to burst…"

Without even looking at him, Xuanmin flicked his thumb against Xue Xian's head. "An array has been placed in the courtyard. If I walked forward, you'd probably suffocate from bloating before finding a house to rest in."

"Ugh, just speak normally. Don't mess with my head while doing so. I'm already dizzy enough without you making it worse…"

Xuanmin glanced down this time. Xue Xian wasn't exaggerating; it would be an understatement to say that his dragon scales were scalding hot. If the one holding him weren't Xuanmin but the likes of Jiang Shining or Lu Nianqi, they'd have screamed in pain and shaken him off by now. It was like having a cup of hot tea spilled on your hand, right onto the thin skin between your fingers. It was a mystery how this evil spirit hadn't burned himself stupid by now.

Noticing that Xue Xian kept seeking out cooler spots, Xuanmin figured he must have been in considerable discomfort. He placed the fingers of his other hand on Xue Xian's scaly skin.

Xue Xian, barely conscious, let out a contented sigh and shifted his body, pressing his head against Xuanmin's fingertips. He didn't mind having his head touched anymore.

Xuanmin sighed to himself and began walking around the courtyard, following the circle of stone carvings. He hadn't noticed it when observing from a distance, but up close he saw that there were small, thumb-sized stones scattered among the intimidating stone beasts. They had looked like ordinary pebbles, but he realized now that they were miniature stone tablets.

The craftsmanship in this region was renowned, not only for its exceptional intricacy but also for its artisans' ability to carve anything and everything. Intricate designs could be etched on surfaces as small as a grain of rice. Likewise, these tiny tablets were exquisitely detailed. Upon each tablet was the fierce, lifelike face of a beast, each ear, horn, nose, and mouth meticulously carved. Even the eyes were carefully dotted with tiny pupils.

Below each beast's face, in minuscule script, were three characters: *Shigandang*.

Shigandang were spirit stones used to dispel evil and misfortune. They were commonly placed at the entrances of residences, inauspicious locations, or street intersections, to drive away malevolent spirits. In some regions, they were also called “Stone Generals.”

Regardless of the name, typical households would only place one or two Shigandang at key locations, such as the Death Gate or areas with heavy yin energy. It was unusual to see them densely packed around stone statues as they were in the Zhang family courtyard. There were approximately twenty Shigandang of various sizes in Shitou Zhang’s yard, obstructing seven of the eight directions. The only open path led to the gate, making the message clear—*Return from whence you came.*

It turned out that the menacing stone creatures scattered across the courtyard were a facade to frighten the ignorant onlooker. The true source of protection lay in the unassuming Shigandang.

“Your breathing is so loud…” Xue Xian muttered drowsily. In his daze, he somehow still found it in himself to complain.

Xuanmin paused for a moment. “If I’m not mistaken, the loud breathing is coming from you.”

Xue Xian was a master at blaming others for his own faults, but Xuanmin didn’t bother arguing further. After all, Xue Xian’s heaving, bellow-like breaths were evidence enough of his discomfort.

Xue Xian hung his head in silence for a while before he processed that the heavy breathing *was* his own. The reason it was so hard to ignore was that their surroundings were unnaturally silent, as if they’d been trapped within the courtyard…or someone had deliberately suppressed all other sounds in the house.

Xuanmin rubbed Xue Xian's head with his cool fingers. Ignoring the stone beasts meant to divert his attention, he swept his gaze over the circle of Shigandang twice.

"Just as I thought…" he murmured.

"What do you mean, 'just as you thought,' huh?" Xue Xian might have been both physically and mentally useless, but he stubbornly kept his ears open.

"Pass out already." Xuanmin pressed a finger against what might have been Xue Xian's ear. The more restless the wise one became, the hotter his body grew. Xuanmin felt like Xue Xian might spontaneously combust at any moment. Hopefully, he wouldn't actually explode.

Xue Xian reached out an unsteady claw to scratch Xuanmin's hand, but he couldn't quite reach it. He no longer had the strength to cause trouble.

What Xuanmin had noticed was that the Shigandang were arranged in a specific order. The eyes of the beastly faces on the tablets weren't quite the same. Some had their eyes wide open, some had them half closed, and others had theirs completely shut. The progression from closed to open eyes indicated the sequence he needed to follow.

Xuanmin reached for the string of copper coins at his waist. As his fingers brushed the edge of the coins, the wound on his finger began to bleed again. A few drops of blood were enough to make the coins emit a soft, resonant hum.

It had been a long time since he had used these coins. Each time he touched them, a strange sense of aversion would swell within him—not toward the coins themselves, but toward something else he couldn't quite

place. He'd always avoided using them unless it was absolutely necessary. It wasn't until he awakened the coins with his blood in the underground tomb on Fentou Island that he broke free of those feelings.

With use came familiarity. The technique for making use of them came naturally, as if it were ingrained in his body rather than his memory. How many times had he done this, to be so familiar with their workings?

One by one, he confirmed the positions of the Shigandang. Northeast. Due west. Due north. Southwest.

Each time he moved to a new cardinal direction, he flicked a coin with his index finger.

Clang!

The sound of the coins wasn't the usual metallic clink but more like the deep, resonant toll of an ancient bell. With each chime, the Shigandang in the corresponding position shattered with a sharp crack.

A fragment of broken stone inadvertently rolled into the wrong position, clinking against the clawed foot of a bixie statue that stood as tall as a person. The bixie's half-closed eyes slowly opened wider, and its head tilted. Its hefty chest began to rise and fall faintly, as if it had come to life. Just when it raised its front paw, arched its back, and prepared to pounce—

Xuanmin calmly stepped to the next position and flicked another coin.

Clang!

The bixie that had been poised to strike turned back to stone, frozen in its pouncing stance.

After eight measured chimes, all the Shigandang lay shattered on the ground. In an instant, faint sounds filtered into the courtyard, and the entire house seemed to come alive. The stone beasts moved aside by themselves, opening up several paths leading to the short corridor, the side rooms, and the main hall.

As the paths opened, the sound of frightened sobbing came from the direction of the main hall. Xuanmin's brow furrowed, and he strode swiftly into the main hall.

Behind an intricately carved screen stood a short, potbellied man, trembling as he stared at Xuanmin. His face was ashen with fear, his posture guarded. He clutched a sword that was around two feet long, but it was an unusual one. It wasn't made of bronze or iron. Instead, it had a skeletal hue, as if it'd been carved from the bone of some creature.

A searing pain shot through Xuanmin's palm, and the grip around his fingers suddenly loosened. Deafening roars erupted in their ears, startling the short man so badly that he fell to the ground. The sword in his hand quivered like a leaf in the wind.

Boom!

A massive black shadow loomed behind Xuanmin. Golden light flashed as thunderclouds churned above, and four bolts of lightning streaked down from the heavens. Four deafening bangs sounded: one to the east, one to the west, one to the south, and one to the north. Each lightning bolt struck around the man with precision, narrowly missing him. He was so terrified that tears streamed down his face, and a wet stain spread across his pants.

In the thunderous howl, a majestic dragon's head emerged from behind Xuanmin, carrying the might and ferocity of a tiger's snarl. It thrust itself before the man, its voice menacing.

"Who gave you such daring, to carve a sword from the bone of a dragon? Hmm?"

The man's eyes crossed in terror, and he fainted on the spot.

Seeing that he'd successfully frightened a man into unconsciousness, Xue Xian turned his massive dragon head to Xuanmin, his expression nonchalant. "I was about to suffocate there."

The tiny dragon that had spent all day coiled around Xuanmin's wrist, small enough that its tail could be pinched between two fingers, had transformed into *this*. Anyone would need a moment to adjust. Xuanmin stared at the enormous dragon head that was nearly half his height, then glanced at the dragon's coiled body, large enough it might burst from the courtyard. His expressionless face froze as solid as ice.

Xue Xian's massive head remained still as he studied Xuanmin's face, catching a flicker of something complex in the monk's otherwise-unconcerned eyes. He squinted and let out a snort. "Are you *pretending* to be calm?"

Xuanmin shot Xue Xian a sidelong glance. Even when transformed, this wise one's tone remained exactly the same.

“Did I scare you so much your legs buckled?” Xue Xian raised one of his sharp claws and leisurely poked Xuanmin in the back, as if mere prodding would cause the monk to collapse right then and there.

“You must still be half asleep,” Xuanmin replied. He’d felt a fleeting bit of surprise and discomfort, but it would be disingenuous to say he was stunned. Xuanmin had lived for a fair amount of time, and he’d never once experienced what it was to be truly dumbfounded.

Xue Xian scrutinized him for a moment but found no trace of fear whatsoever. His massive head thudded upon his claw with a dull thump.

“You, bald donkey, are the most boring person I’ve ever met,” Xue Xian said in a lifeless monotone. “I’ve never seen anyone like you.”

Having failed to scare the person he’d *wanted* to scare the most, thus missing out on his chance to make Xuanmin lose his composure, Xue Xian felt a wave of tedium wash over him. Even the initial shock and anger at seeing his own bone faded. He swiped a claw at the short man’s hand, and the white dragon-bone sword clattered to the ground. He picked it up.

The moment he saw the intricate patterns carved into the sword, his anger flared up again. Who the hell did this guy think he was? How dare he!

Xue Xian was too furious to look at the sword any longer. With a surge of heat from his right forefoot, the sword melted as if burned by flames, seeping into his body through the sole of his foot. All that remained was a faint, smoldering warmth at the tips of his claws.

But he felt a twinge of regret after absorbing the sword. The heat coursed through his meridians, pooling in his spine, where it caused him immense discomfort. The sensation of warmth and swelling, which had only just started to subside, returned with a vengeance. Unfortunately, his

head was too large right now. He couldn't roll around, let alone rub against the gaps between Xuanmin's fingers to cool down.

After a moment's hesitation, he subtly moved the front half of his body. In an instant, Xuanmin was enveloped on all sides by Xue Xian's enormous figure—the dragon had silently coiled around him, trapping him in the center.

Xuanmin looked up. "Why are you rubbing against me?"

Xue Xian glanced down at him in disdain, then turned his head away and said with feigned gravity, "I'm borrowing your coolness. If I catch fire, you'll be doomed too."

Things hadn't been so bad when the dragon was tiny—he'd only burned the area around Xuanmin's hand. Now that Xue Xian was the size of a house, him coiling around Xuanmin was like wrapping the monk in seven or eight layers of cotton padding, encircling him with fire pits, and smothering him with a heavy quilt… Deeply uncomfortable, in other words.

Xuanmin's gaze inadvertently fell on the bundle of clothes in his hand. Xue Xian, turning his head back, followed his line of sight.

Wonderful. He was still naked.

Xue Xian's face remained expressionless in contemplation. He hadn't cared about such trivial matters when he was half conscious earlier. Touching something cool had felt like grabbing a lifeline. Who cared if he was clothed or not? He wasn't even in human form. Nevertheless…

Eh, screw it. I'm hot, and I'm still not in human form. With that thought, Xue Xian shamelessly rubbed against Xuanmin a couple more times.

Xuanmin was flabbergasted.

Just because Xue Xian had spent time living among humans didn't mean he had truly become one of them. Dragons might have been divine, but they were beasts at heart. His temperament carried a certain raw, unbridled wildness—when he was hot, he needed to stop being hot. Comfort came first; everything else could wait.

He maintained an air of righteous confidence, but his eyes flicked toward Xuanmin. If he wasn't mistaken, a faint wave of discomfort flashed over Xuanmin's face, so quick it was almost imperceptible. Then, Xuanmin frowned.

Frowned…

Xuanmin rarely showed much emotion. He only frowned when he encountered something dirty or troublesome—in short, it was usually a sign of disgust or distaste.

Xue Xian froze, struck by an inexplicable pang of discomfort. It was as if a line of spiders were crawling across his chest, their tiny legs prickling unpleasantly. The scorching heat that had overwhelmed him seemed to drop away all at once. Well, it became more tolerable, at least. Xue Xian's coiled body relaxed, leaving some space around Xuanmin.

It was unusual for someone so unruly to turn considerate. Xuanmin glanced at him in surprise, only to see that Xue Xian was focused on the short man lying unconscious on the ground. Perhaps it was the sheer intimidation of his enormity, or simply that a dragon's face wasn't built to express emotions. Now that Xue Xian wasn't clinging to Xuanmin, he radiated an air of aloofness that made him seem more like a real dragon than ever.

“Not hot anymore?” Xuanmin asked blandly. “There’s no other movement coming from inside the house. He’s probably alone. But he’s unconscious, so questioning him will be difficult.”

“Mhm,” said Xue Xian. Without another word, he summoned a bolt of lightning from the sky. It struck with tremendous force, hitting the ground between the short man’s sprawled legs and fracturing the floor into a network of cracks. Under the threat of castration, the short man jolted awake.

“Spare me, spare me!” he cried. “I’m just a humble stonemason! I’ve done all the work I was supposed to do, and I’ll keep my mouth shut about what I shouldn’t say. Please, just let me live, I—”

This short man was none other than Shitou Zhang. Before he’d even fully opened his eyes, he began babbling a string of words. It was clearly something he’d mentally rehearsed for a long time. However, once he came to his senses and found himself under the silent gaze of a massive black dragon, his words faltered. He swallowed the rest of his sentence, and his face turned ashen.

“Don’t stop now. Keep going,” Xue Xian said, his voice as cold as a river in the depths of winter. As he spoke, another bolt of lightning descended from the sky. Its white light froze in midair, just above Shitou Zhang’s head.

The short man was so terrified that his thoughts poured out like a flood. “Wh-what I said earlier was all nonsense! I didn’t mean any offense to you two! I-I’ve just been hounded by debt collectors for months and had no choice but to lock myself in the house, a-and I learned a trick to set up a

flimsy array from a Taoist priest, hoping to buy myself a few days of safety. Great immortal, please spare me!"

"You expect me to believe that?" Xue Xian sneered. "If you were being pursued by ordinary debt collectors, why would you need to set up an array to block them?"

Shitou Zhang trembled, too afraid to respond.

"A question. Where did the dragon bone in that sword you were holding come from?" Xuanmin cut in abruptly, reminding Xue Xian of the main issue at hand.

"Dragon bone?" Shitou Zhang looked as if he had been struck by lightning. He repeated in a breathless whisper, "Dragon bone?"

When his eyes met Xue Xian's, he nearly wet himself again. The thought that he'd unknowingly brought back the bone of a real dragon, meticulously carved it into a sword and polished it, and even engraved designs on it…

Ancestors above, how am I still alive?! Shitou Zhang's eyes rolled back. He was about to faint again when a cold, threatening voice stopped him.

"If you close your eyes, don't expect to open them again."

"I honestly didn't know i-it was… I-I just have a knack for spotting things others can't," Shitou Zhang stammered. "That time I saw a glimmer in the soil and couldn't resist digging it up. I found the bone and thought it was something special, maybe a spiritual relic, so I brought it back. People say sharp objects can ward off evil, so I-I carved it into a sword for protection's sake…"

Under Xue Xian's piercing gaze, Shitou Zhang's voice grew quieter and quieter.

"Where did you dig it up?"

"On…on the mountain by the river."

"Must you drag this out word by word?" Xue Xian's patience was wearing thin. "Do you need me to give you a little 'encouragement'?"

"N-no, no need!" Shitou Zhang was on the verge of tears. "I was blindfolded the entire way there. They only removed the blindfold when we arrived. There were no markers on the mountain, so I can't pinpoint where it was exactly. I just remember being able to see the river from the mountain. The river was narrow and swift. The sound of its waves was terrifying."

Xue Xian was so furious he nearly fell over. The lightning hovering above Shitou Zhang's head crashed down with a loud bang, narrowly missing him. Shitou Zhang was too scared to move. He stood stiff as a coffin board, tears streaming down his face.

"What were you taken there to do?" Xuanmin asked.

"They had me carve seven stone locks and two tomb guardian beasts." Shitou Zhang was as pale as a ghost as he answered.

Xuanmin nodded in understanding and pulled a thin sheet of paper from his hidden pouch, unfolding it in front of Shitou Zhang. "Was this pattern made by you?"

"Yes, yes! That's what they had me carve. While I was working on it, I could sense the spiritual energy in the pattern, so I asked them about it.

They told me it was a longevity talisman. Very potent. But where did you get this rubbing, Master?"

"That stone lock of yours," Xuanmin replied. "It's probably lying at the bottom of the river now. Do you recognize the corpse it was tied to?"

"Corpse?" Shitou Zhang had clearly never imagined that the stone locks he carved would be attached to a corpse. He shook his head frantically. "I-I don't know. I just carved what they asked for. When that client came to me, they only said my sculptures had the most spiritual energy. I assumed it was some out-of-town noble who wanted me to carve something for display. I never thought…" He hesitated. "A-anyway, things haven't been peaceful for me lately. It feels like someone wants me dead, but I haven't offended anyone. That incident was the only strange thing that happened to me, so that's why…I've been hiding."

Xue Xian's gaze bore into Shitou Zhang, sending chills down his spine. Finally, Xue Xian spoke in a cold, detached tone: "Did the person who took you to the mountain leave anything with you?"

"Anything? What sort of anything?"

"Anything that has passed through their hands."

Shitou Zhang was about to shake his head when he suddenly slapped his thigh. "Oh, right! There is one thing!"

"What is it?"

"The black cloth they used to blindfold me. I still have it! I didn't dare throw it away."

Xue Xian snorted. "Well done."

Shitou Zhang scrambled into the inner chamber and unearthed a piece of black cloth. It was unclear how long it had been stuffed in there or whether it had ever been washed.

Xuanmin frowned, his face tinged with slight disgust. He was about to find something to use as a barrier to pick up the cloth. Xue Xian noticed Xuanmin's expression and, remembering his earlier reaction, reached out with his claw to grab the cloth himself.

Taken aback, Xuanmin glanced at him, but Xue Xian didn't return the gaze.

"Let's go," Xue Xian said, his tone indifferent.

Xuanmin was silent for a moment before asking, "Where?"

"To the heavens," Xue Xian retorted sarcastically, then turned to Shitou Zhang. "Stop shaking like a leaf and come with us."

"If I'm not mistaken, you're planning to return to the Lu residence," Xuanmin observed. "Do you intend to go back like this?"

As he spoke, his eyes swept over Xue Xian's massive dragon form. Xue Xian blinked. He'd been so angry, he'd almost departed as an entire normal-sized dragon.

He couldn't transform back into his compact form in his current state. His meridians, skin, and bones were still swollen with heat, making it impossible for him to shrink that much.

If he couldn't transform into a small dragon, his only other option was to take human form. Xuanmin held up the bundle of clothes. Xue Xian grabbed it with his claw, his face set.

Just one problem. At his current size, he would not fit in any one room. So, how the hell was he supposed to get dressed, huh?

The heavens must have been jealous of his good looks, since they were always playing these jokes on him.

Chapter 16:
Traveler from Afar

XUE XIAN WAS A DRAGON who cared deeply about his reputation, given his lifestyle and the transcendent status he'd held for the majority of his life—at least, that's what he would have told anyone who asked. Still, maintaining his dignity wasn't an unbreakable rule for him. Sometimes he made concessions and ignored his pride. Like when he lounged around, barking orders at that bookworm Jiang Shining, or when he helped himself to Xuanmin's money. But there were situations where compromise wasn't an option, especially when it came to his image and authority.

If he were in good health and had a full set of functional limbs, then being seen naked wouldn't be a big deal to him. He wasn't ashamed of his physique, and he was no ordinary person. It wasn't in his nature to kick up such a fuss about changing clothes.

But he was now a paraplegic and just moving was frustrating. Being naked was one thing; enduring the bald donkey's condescending gaze was another. It would be too much to bear. The mere thought of that scenario made Xue Xian want to grind his teeth. He'd rather be hanged than face someone in such a state.

Xue Xian turned his deadpan gaze on Shitou Zhang. "Hey, do me a favor and kick the bucket for a moment."

Shitou Zhang blinked. Kicking the bucket meant dying! How could he do that for just a moment?!

He didn't know what a force to be reckoned with Xue Xian was. Without waiting for a response, Xue Xian summoned two bolts of lightning in quick succession, scaring Shitou Zhang so badly that his legs collapsed and his eyes rolled back. He had fainted on the spot.

Shitou Zhang had the courage of a sparrow: Scare him and he'd cry; startle him and he'd faint. He was easy to deal with. Xuanmin was a different story. Xue Xian shot him a dark glare.

"Tell me, how can I make you faint? I'll try every method."

The evil spirit was being unreasonable again. Xuanmin stayed silent.

The quickest way to make someone faint was to hit them on the head. Xue Xian raised his claw and waved it back and forth in front of Xuanmin's face, with complete disregard for how Xuanmin might feel about that method.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian's stubby dragon claw and pushed it down. "A gentleman must conceal his sharpness." Translated into more normal terms: *Stop waving that claw around.*

Xue Xian let out a short, cold snort. *Who are you to tell me what to do?*

Nevertheless, he gave up on making Xuanmin faint. He didn't have much control over his strength in his current form. If he miscalculated and struck too hard, they'd be visiting the bald donkey's grave this time next year. It was true he was annoyed with Xuanmin, but not enough to actually want to kill him.

Not getting the chance to make Xuanmin suffer only soured Xue Xian's mood further. He turned his upper body away, no longer interested in

bothering Xuanmin, and instead summoned a cloud of mist. A thick white fog gathered around Xuanmin, enveloping him and obscuring his view.

Xue Xian swiftly sliced through the knot on the bundle of clothes with his claw, and his massive body was swallowed by a brilliant white light. Though the light was blinding, to Xuanmin it appeared soft and gentle as it filtered through the mist.

Within the light, Xue Xian transformed into his human form. Though his body wasn't fully healed, wielding a bit of magic posed no difficulty for a real and mighty dragon. Even while half paralyzed, changing clothes was hardly a challenge. By the time the light began to fade, he was already mostly dressed.

Xuanmin had briefly thought about offering to help, but it seemed that wasn't necessary. He stood in the frosty winter mist, studied the fading light, and waited patiently.

Mist never lasted long. From the moment it enveloped Xuanmin, it began to thin and disperse. By the time the mist had cleared enough to see, Xue Xian was draping a large cloudlike garment over himself. His lean waist and the outline of his shoulder blades flashed briefly as he moved his arms before they were concealed by a black robe.

The clothing was simple and plain, without any embellishments or decorations. It made for quite a contrast with Xue Xian's mischievous personality, but it was what he preferred to wear. The ink-black collar accentuated his profile and the visible parts of his neck, rendering them extremely pale, almost sickly. When he wasn't smiling or making trouble, his dark eyes were half lidded and languid. His black eyelashes cast faint

shadows at the corners of his eyes, and his unsmiling lips gave him an air of detachment. He was strikingly handsome yet a little unapproachable.

Perhaps it was the brief glimpse of his pale back or the impassiveness of Xue Xian's profile—a stark contrast to the mocking smile he'd worn while perched on the Liu family's courtyard wall—that caused Xuanmin to freeze for a moment.

Xue Xian shifted, his dark eyes flicking over in a sideways glance. The mist had completely dissipated, so he casually tugged his collar shut and hurried to fasten the hidden buttons. Then, as if performing a magic trick, he produced a thin black cord, bit down on it, and used it to tie his hair in a few quick motions.

Xue Xian lowered his hands and conjured a gust of wind beneath him for support. With a swift push and flip, the hem of his black robes billowed like clouds before fluttering down. In the blink of an eye, he'd grabbed a wooden chair and sprawled lazily over it.

Even when half paralyzed, he couldn't resist striking a pose. Xuanmin wondered what was wrong with him.

"Can we go?" Xue Xian tapped the armrest of the chair with his fingers.

"Mm," said Xuanmin. He took a step forward, as if to reach for Xue Xian.

Xue Xian immediately slapped the armrest, causing the chair to screech across the floor and carry him back a good distance.

"What are you doing?" he demanded with wide-eyed surprise.

Xuanmin dropped his hand. “How else do you plan to get back? Can you walk or fly?”

Hah, I really can fly! What are you gonna do about that?! Xue Xian mentally retorted, though he didn’t say it out loud. He couldn’t just float through the sky in broad daylight—doing so would scare the entire county out of their wits.

Xuanmin just added fuel to the fire. “Do you plan to summon a gust of wind and bound back, chair and all, like you did earlier?”

Why did I hesitate back then? I should’ve swatted this bald donkey dead and been done with it. That would’ve spared me his sarcastic remarks. Acting so serious when he says them… Bah! Who cares about you?

Xue Xian spat venom in his heart, but his expression was numb. “Fine, do me a favor and turn around, squat down, and carry me—”

Before Xue Xian could finish his sentence, Xuanmin had walked over, bent down, and effortlessly scooped Xue Xian up. One of Xuanmin’s hands supported the back of Xue Xian’s neck while the other hooked beneath his knees. It was as though Xuanmin wasn’t carrying a full-grown man but cradling a fallen leaf in his palm.

“This monk does not squat or kneel, nor does he hunch when walking,” Xuanmin said as he straightened up.

Forget inside his heart, Xue Xian wanted to spew his guts in Xuanmin’s *face*. “Who are you trying to fool? You squatted just fine when you were digging me up with that rusty copper piece at the Jiang family clinic!”

But he couldn't afford to kick up a fuss in Xuanmin's arms. If he lost his balance and fell, it'd be horrifically humiliating. Xue Xian held his breath, almost suffocating himself in the process. He glanced around, feeling that this position enfeebled him and stripped him of dignity. His eyes flitted around until he came up with a solution. He grabbed the bundle of clothes, shook out another black robe, and cloaked himself from head to toe.

When you are forced into an embarrassing situation, remember one thing: Cover your face. Xue Xian was already dressed in black, and now his entire head and face were covered by black fabric. He lay like a corpse in Xuanmin's arms, as if he'd already breathed his last.

Xuanmin considered bowing to him in defeat.

Xue Xian remained motionless for a moment, then remembered Shitou Zhang was unconscious on the ground. He raised a pale, ghostly hand and casually summoned another thunderclap, loud enough to wake everyone within a ten-mile radius. The related bolt struck right beside Shitou Zhang's ear, jolting him awake.

Shitou Zhang scrambled to his feet with a mournful expression and slunk over to stand behind Xuanmin. When he saw the figure in Xuanmin's arms, he stumbled again. It took him a while to steady his trembling legs and stand upright.

From under the fabric, Xue Xian's muffled voice said, "All set, let's go."

Xuanmin shook his head and strode out of the courtyard.

It had to be said that the wise one's unconventional methods were effective. Hardly anyone dared to glance in Xuanmin's direction. At the

sight of the lifeless figure in his arms, people turned away in disgust. They covered their faces and hurried off, unwilling to look for a moment longer.

By the time the two men and the ersatz corpse entered the Lu family courtyard, the sky had already darkened. Jiang Shining had just stepped out of the kitchen and was startled by the cloaked figure Xuanmin was carrying. Having spent more time with Xue Xian than Xuanmin, and being someone who paid close attention to details, Jiang Shining immediately recognized the hand dangling out from the cloth. Jiang Shining's hands trembled, and he nearly dropped the lamp he was holding as he rushed over.

Fortunately, Xuanmin was quick to explain. "He's alive and well, just pretending to be dead."

"What? What kind of play is he putting on this time?"

Xuanmin didn't answer. He strode into the main hall and placed Xue Xian in a chair beside the square table. Only then did Xue Xian remove the cloth covering his face and let out a long sigh.

"I almost suffocated in there."

Exasperated, Jiang Shining set the oil lamp on the table. "You brought it upon yourself. Serves you right." He then rounded on Shitou Zhang, his gaze brimming with ghostly energy. "And this fellow is…?"

Startled by Jiang Shining's dull and lifeless eyes, Shitou Zhang stammered, "J-just a stonemason. You can call me Old Zhang or Shitou Zhang."

Xue Xian pointed to a stone lock leaning against the wall. "Look there. Did you carve that?"

Shitou Zhang glanced at it and immediately nodded. “Yes, yes, it’s indeed my work. I recognize it.”

“So…that’s the story,” Xue Xian said, shrugging at Jiang Shining. “He has a connection with the person who set up the tomb on Fentou Island, and he happens to have something that person or their subordinate touched. Once Lu Nianqi wakes up, we can have him do a divination. We might uncover some clues.”

“Lu Nianqi?” Jiang Shining was confused before understanding sank in. “Are you sure he has that kind of ability?”

Xue Xian nodded. “I surmise so.” He idly played with the flame of the lamp while in his chair. After a couple of flicks, he suddenly slapped the table. “Right, I almost forgot.”

Jiang Shining and Shitou Zhang had been huddled by the table. At this, they jumped and turned to him, expecting some kind of profound insight.

Instead, Xue Xian shot Xuanmin a sidelong glance and said, “What about the meal you owe me?”

“What nonsense is this?” Jiang Shining asked.

“Good heavens, that scared me,” Shitou Zhang said.

Xuanmin gave Xue Xian a look, then turned and strode out of the hall.

About ten minutes later, he returned, calm and composed, carrying a takeout box. His demeanor made it seem like he was holding a lotus flower placed before a Buddhist statue, not food. Jiang Shining glanced at him and

then at Xue Xian seated next to him, still lounging in his chair. Jiang Shining silently turned his face away.

The food box was comprised of four layers. There were six dishes and a plate of pastries. Xue Xian scanned the table. The porcelain plates were warm, the dishes delicate and beautifully arranged, emitting a faint aroma that was indeed appetizing.

But…

But!

There wasn't a trace of meat in the entire spread. It was all vegetarian! All! Vegetarian! Had anyone ever seen a dragon survive on grass?

Xue Xian rolled his eyes, about to pass out from rage. His old grievances resurfaced, and his frustration with Xuanmin rose yet again.

Although Xuanmin's memories were incomplete, his habits remained. He likely hadn't eaten meat in the past, or perhaps he hadn't eaten much at all, which was why he could go days without food and remain perfectly fine. In any case, asking him to buy food meant no meat.

Jiang Shining had to be the one to make another trip and bring back some hearty dishes. In the end, they finally got a proper meal.

Aside from the incident eight years ago, Lu Nianqi had never experienced such suffering.

He had been in a deep sleep for seven days, fluctuating between fever and recovery. Occasionally, when the fever spiked, he would mumble a few words in the middle of the night—sometimes "Father," sometimes "Shijiu." Maybe if he didn't open his eyes, the events that had happened wouldn't be

real, and those who were gone would still be sitting by his bed, quietly waiting for him to wake up.

On the seventh night, just as the night watchman struck his gong, Lu Nianqi's fingers twitched, and he opened his eyes. Because he had been feverish for so long, his eyes were bloodshot. In the light of the oil lamp, they glistened with moisture, like he was perpetually on the verge of tears.

Jiang Shining came into the room to trim the lamp wick. When he saw that Lu Nianqi's eyes were open, he asked, "You're awake? Thirsty?"

Jiang Shining called out to the main hall to let them know, then walked to Lu Nianqi's bedside and removed the medicinal cloth from his forehead. He shivered at the cold touch of Jiang Shining's ghostly body, and the moisture in his eyes spilled over, dampening the corner of the blanket.

"Is today…the seventh day?"

Jiang Shining paused before he nodded. "Yes, it's the last night."

Lu Nianqi covered his eyes with the back of his hand for a moment, then sat up. "Is he still here? I'll spend the last night with him."

Jiang Shining wondered if he was imagining things, but after his long sleep, Lu Nianqi's tone had become uncannily similar to Lu Shijiu's. When Lu Nianqi stood up, Jiang Shining grew even more certain of his suspicions: Lu Nianqi, once so small, had grown a few inches in the seven days. He no longer looked like a seven- or eight-year-old boy, but someone around eleven or twelve.

Lu Nianqi felt his way out of the room and nodded listlessly at everyone. Under Jiang Shining's guidance, he entered the side room, closed the door, and stayed there the entire night.

Throughout the night, the side room was completely silent—no crying, no talking. When he'd promised to accompany Lu Shijiu, he genuinely meant it. He stayed by his side, without speaking, without clinging to him—just as they'd always been.

The next morning, Lu Nianqi emerged from the room, his face pale. He touched the wooden twigs Lu Shijiu had left him and stared in Shitou Zhang's direction for a long time before saying softly, "Excuse me, could you carve two wooden tablets for me?"

Although he was a stonemason, Shitou Zhang was also capable of working with wood, just not as skillfully as with stone. He was momentarily taken aback but nodded.

Xue Xian helpfully explained: "He can't see you nodding."

Shitou Zhang stared at Lu Nianqi's eyes for a moment. He dared not say too much. "Of course."

Having lived in Wolong County for many years, Shitou Zhang was somewhat acquainted with the Lu family, even if they weren't close. When he heard Lu Nianqi's request, he understood what he needed. He was a skilled craftsman, so he swiftly whittled out two tablets and carved some traditional etchings along the sides.

"What should I engrave on them?" he asked.

"On one, 'In memory of my late father, Lu Yuan,'" Lu Nianqi said.

Shitou Zhang did as instructed and carefully carved out the words.

"And the other?" he asked after blowing away the wood shavings.

Lu Nianqi fell silent for a long time.

What should be engraved on the other one? Lu Shijiu's formal name? He hadn't lived long enough to be given one of those, so there was nothing to be carved there. "Shijiu" was just a nickname, one shared by countless others. Using that name in the underworld might lead to confusion. Moreover, Lu Nianqi didn't *want* to carve Shijiu's name. It felt as if doing so would mean his brother—always so aloof, even though he'd given his life for Lu Nianqi—would truly be gone forever.

"Forget it. Leave the other one blank," Lu Nianqi said.

He took the two tablets from Shitou Zhang, fumbled through a cabinet for some cloth, and without asking for help, packed some simple belongings and wrapped the tablets inside, tying it securely. He then sat by the square table with the bundle, holding the wooden twigs and facing Xue Xian.

"I know what you want. I've known from the moment I opened my eyes. I'll help you with the divination in Shijiu's place, though I might not be as accurate as he was. I only ask one thing: Help me bury Shijiu."

Even if he didn't like relying on others, burying someone wasn't something a half-blind person could do alone.

"Consider it done," Xue Xian replied.

The black cloth Shitou Zhang handed over had been kept in Xuanmin's pouch. Now, they spread it over the table for Lu Nianqi to perform divination with.

Lu Nianqi's eyes were clouded and misty as he stared at the black cloth. He sprinkled a handful of fine soil onto the table and slowly traced out patterns with the wooden branch. His movements and expression bore

an uncanny resemblance to Lu Shijiu's, as if two souls resided within one body.

When he finished, he gently touched the soil, frowning a little in thought.

"I'm afraid I don't have Shijiu's spiritual acuity. I can only tell that the person you're looking for is currently on the other side of the river. I can see the general appearance of their location, but I can't pinpoint the exact spot. We might have to go there to find it."

He smoothed out the soil on the table and performed the divination again, to the same results. However, he didn't seem surprised by this. He patted the bundle on the table and spoke.

"If you don't mind an extra burden, I can go with you."

After all, he had no living relatives in Wolong County. Without family, his roots were severed, and it made no difference where he lived. Someone who could discern the origins of objects would naturally be a valuable addition to the group.

They'd already spent considerable time in Wolong County and couldn't afford to keep delaying. So, in the dim morning light, they buried Lu Shijiu beside Lu Yuan's grave.

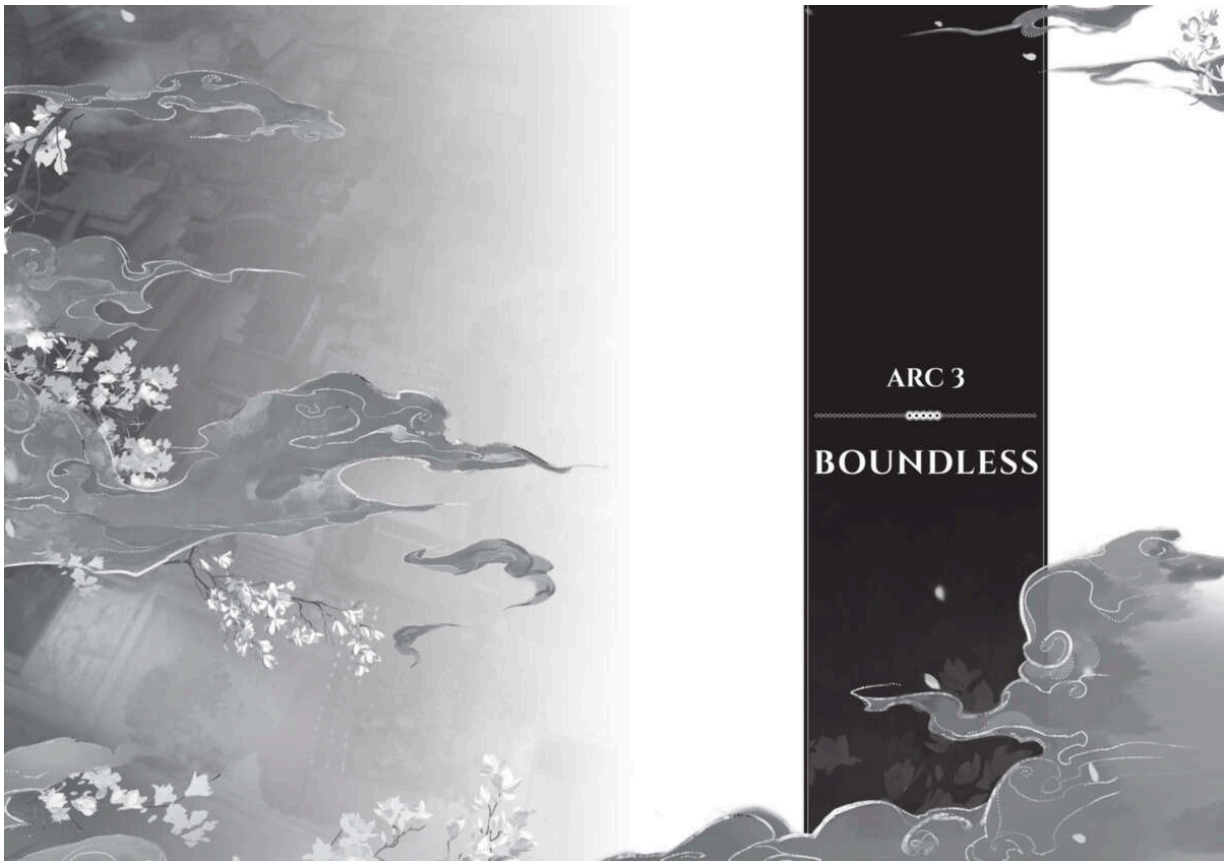
Lu Nianqi knelt before the grave, bowing his head to the ground, three times on each side. Then he brushed the dirt from his clothes with a calm expression, shouldered the memorial tablets, and set off with Xuanmin and the others.

When they boarded the passenger boat to cross the river, the sky was overcast, and a heavy snow began to fall. The fine snow alighted on the

nameless new grave in the mountains and on the top of the black awning of the lone boat. It blanketed both the underworld and the bustling mortal realm. It was a grand farewell, bidding goodbye to both the nameless ghost and the traveler embarking on a distant journey.

Perhaps this was the deepest expression of yearning and reluctance to part that could be expressed by humans: *You're gone, but it's all right. I'll become you and carry you with me.*

From this moment onward, time would never trouble them again. They would traverse the same path through countless mountains and share the same boat across endless waters.


ARC 3
BOUNDLESS

Chapter 17:
The Theater Troupe

ANQING PREFECTURE AND Wolong County were divided by a river. On crisp, clear days, one could even catch sight of the faint outlines of the mountain peaks on the opposite shore of the riverbank in Wolong County.

When the waters were calm, it took only about an hour to row a small boat across. However, heavy snow was falling at that moment. Before they had made it halfway across, the river was blanketed in white, making it seem as though their lone boat was the only thing in the vast wilderness. Steering in the right direction became extremely difficult. Their progress slowed.

The boatman was a familiar face: the man they had previously rented the boat from when they wanted to go to Fentou Island. He'd received a generous sum of silver from Xuanmin then and was feeling a little guilty. When he saw them preparing to cross the river this time, he hesitated only briefly before setting out against the wind and snow.

"I've got two jars of hot wine wrapped in my bag. If you don't mind, share some to warm yourselves up!" the boatman said as he rowed.

"Thank you."

Everyone expressed their gratitude, but only Xue Xian reached for the wine. Xuanmin didn't drink alcohol and wasn't troubled by the cold. Jiang Shining, being a wandering ghost, couldn't consume anything. Lu Nianqi had been lost in thought since boarding the boat and was clearly not in the mood.

Shitou Zhang was shivering from the cold and did want a sip, but he only darted his beady eyes around, too scared to reach for it. He had assumed that the group wouldn't bring him along—that after they'd asked their questions and had him carve the two memorial tablets, they would send him packing. To his surprise, they were now taking him across the river.

For Shitou Zhang, this wasn't necessarily a bad thing. If he stayed in the county, he would only cower in his house, trembling day after day. Who knew how long he'd been hiding behind the hall with his sword before Xue Xian and Xuanmin had barged into his courtyard? He stole a glance at Xue Xian, thinking that while the wise one was terrifying, the lightning he'd summoned each time had avoided his vital spots. Clearly, this group didn't intend to kill him. Apart from the occasional fright, there was no real harm in following them.

Xue Xian cradled the wine jar in his hands but had no plans to drink it. In fact, he was burning up inside and didn't need to ward off the cold. He held the jar not to warm himself but to cool down. Although the wine had been kept warm in its wrappings, it should have cooled somewhat after being exposed to the river's chill for so long.

After a while, the wine jar began to emit a faint gurgling sound. Apart from Lu Nianqi, who remained silent, everyone in the boat turned their attention to the jar in Xue Xian's hands.

He wasn't just warming the wine—he was boiling it!

Shitou Zhang gazed longingly at the jar, hunching his shoulders and tucking his hands into his sleeves, as if he wished he could shrink down and dive into the pot to be stewed along with the wine.

As the heat rose, the aroma of the wine seeped through the cracks in the boat, making Shitou Zhang's eyes glaze over. He rubbed his hands together like a fly.

"Ah, this wine smells fantastic," he said. "When I'm carving, I like to have a few sips too. It warms the belly, and once the alcohol kicks in, my hands feel just right."

His words, both direct and indirect, were a plea to Xue Xian: *Please, give me a sip!*

Jiang Shining couldn't bear to watch any longer. He nudged Xue Xian with his elbow.

"Stop messing around, Wise One," he whispered. "He's about to toss himself out of the boat with his shivering."

Xue Xian didn't hold back with his heat, and soon the wine was roiling. He handed the jar of wine to the eager Shitou Zhang, then picked up the second jar without pause.

Shitou Zhang grasped the wine jar with his sleeve and cradled it in his arms, feeling alive again. He let out a long sigh. "Finally, a bit of warmth. The cold on this river is no joke."

Having temporarily relieved his fever, Xue Xian tossed the second pot to Shitou Zhang as well.

"Both for me?" Shitou Zhang was shocked and delighted.

"Are you still dreaming or what?" Xue Xian snapped.

Just as Shitou Zhang was about to ask more questions, Xuanmin, who'd been perched on the boat's edge, took the wine and handed it to the boatman.

Xue Xian glanced at him but said nothing. To him, this was a tacit agreement.

Jiang Shining peeked between Xue Xian and Xuanmin. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but over the past couple of days, he'd noticed something strange going on between the two. Xue Xian seemed particularly fixated on Xuanmin, alternating between provoking him and ignoring him. Of course, Xue Xian had always enjoyed picking on Xuanmin, and sometimes he'd ignore him, but this time seemed different.

After staring at the two, he cast his eyes down and turned his thoughts inward. In some ways, these two were *both* wise ones to Jiang Shining, so he couldn't afford to offend either. It was better not to meddle. With that thought, he shifted further into the corner of the boat.

Thud!

The boat abruptly rocked. Shitou Zhang, who had been tilting his head back to drink, had lost his balance and elbowed the side of the boat.

"You look as thin as a bamboo strip, but you've got some weight on you, to make the boat shake with your movements," Xue Xian remarked to Jiang Shining.

"It wasn't this young master who caused it," the boatman called out. After a few sips of the hot wine, he seemed much more spirited. "This stretch of the river is just like that—it gets a bit bumpy. Every year, boats capsize here in the summer and winter. Either the water rises and the waves get rough, or the wind becomes strong enough to overturn boats. It's been calmer the past couple of years, though. We haven't seen those big waves or fierce winds, so more boats have been traveling this route. But things feel a bit strange today, as if something's waiting to stir up trouble."

Shitou Zhang, a coward who dreaded death, panicked upon hearing this. He leaned toward the boatman. “Th-this boat won’t capsize, will it?”

The boatman gave him a displeased look. “The boat’s still moving. Why say something so unlucky? It won’t. I just said it’s a bit strange, not that we’re about to hit a big wave.”

He sighed and continued. “Gentlemen, I’m not complaining, but I sincerely advise you not to be stubborn when crossing the river in the future. Listen to your boatman. No one likes to go out on days like this. You don’t live by the river, so you don’t know its temperament. We spend our days on the water and practically treat our boats as our homes, so we can tell right away whether it’s safe to set out. Mark my words, in two days at most, this river will turn tumultuous.

“Besides,” the boatman drawled on, squinting as he took a sip of hot wine and rowed with one hand, “why did you choose now to go to Anqing Prefecture? Things aren’t peaceful over there.”

“Not peaceful? How so?” Jiang Shining’s elder sister had married into Anqing Prefecture; he frowned upon hearing this.

“I heard it from a boatman who came from the other side a couple of days ago,” the boatman said, lowering his voice. “There was an earthquake in Anqing Prefecture a few days ago. The whole place shook several times. What’s more, a mountain collapsed, and some people claimed that while their houses were shaking, they heard what sounded like a dragon baying from underground.”

Baying… What a dignified description—making it sound like a dog bark they heard from someone’s house!

“That’s called a dragon’s roar!” Xue Xian irritably corrected. He then sat up straight as a rod. “Wait, what? A dragon’s roar? Someone told you they heard a dragon’s roar in Anqing Prefecture?”

“For sure!” The boatman spoke as if he had heard it himself. “It was terrifying, they said. Most people prostrated themselves on the spot. Strangely enough, after a few bows, the shaking stopped and the earthquake subsided. Still, some people died. But that’s not the strangest part. After the earthquake, cracks appeared all over the city, and things crawled out of them—worms or something. I didn’t quite catch the details, but in short, it’s been a mess.”

Jiang Shining’s expression turned grim when he heard this (though, as a wandering ghost, his pale, greenish complexion wasn’t pleasant to begin with).

Everyone on the boat became lost in their own thoughts, and the journey continued in silence.

Half an hour later, the boatman finally docked at Wangjiang County, a small, obscure town in Anqing Prefecture. They disembarked in a place called Guanyin Crossing. Near the ferry crossing were some small, old inns, tea pavilions, and wine shops. The snow was falling heavily, and it was impossible to travel through it, especially since Xue Xian was among them.

Jiang Shining left the dock, shielded himself from the snow, and approached a man by the tea pavilion.

“Is there a place nearby where we can hire a carriage?”

“Not in this weather,” the man replied, huddling by the tea stove to keep warm. “There was an earthquake a few days ago. The houses held up, but the sheds weren’t sturdy enough, so most of our mules and horses were

crushed. They can't run, much less pull carriages. No one here can rent out donkey carts, so don't count on it."

The man had three long and frightening scars on his face, as if he'd been clawed by some beast. He squinted, drained the hot tea in his hand, and glanced at Jiang Shining. "Where're you headed?"

"Further north, to Qingping County," Jiang Shining replied.

The scar-faced man scrutinized him carefully. "A scholar? Visiting family?"

Jiang Shining nodded.

The man placed his teacup upside down on the table and gestured outside with his chin. "Are those people with you?"

Jiang Shining turned around to see Xuanmin carrying the paraplegic Xue Xian toward them. Back in Wolong County, Xue Xian had steadfastly refused to let himself be so vulnerable, but the snow had beaten him. He'd resigned himself to his fate. Beside them was Shitou Zhang, his shoulders hunched and his hands tucked into his sleeves, and Lu Nianqi, who looked listless.

A party that included an old man, a child, and a monster would be a considerable burden on the master. Jiang Shining silently tutted, then turned back to the scar-faced man and cupped his hands in a polite greeting, thinking to discuss with Xuanmin and the others if they should stay at the inn for a day and wait for the snow to stop.

"Don't expect the snow to stop," the scar-faced man said like a mind reader. He wiped his mouth and picked up a long cloth-wrapped bundle

from the table. “Come on, we’ll give you a ride. We’re heading in the direction of Qingping County anyway.”

We?

Jiang Shining started. As the scar-faced man stood, eight or nine people—men, women, old, and young—rose from the tea pavilion one after another.

Xuanmin, on the edge of the threshold, heard the scar-faced man’s words and looked at Jiang Shining. “What is it?” he asked.

“This kind gentleman offered to give us a ride,” Jiang Shining explained.

The scar-faced man had already reached the door. He glanced at the bundle Xuanmin was carrying and paused, pointing at it. “What’s that wrapped up in there?”

“A person,” Xuanmin replied calmly.

“Dead?” The scar-faced man frowned at the black cloth covering the head. “That’s a bit inconvenient. We’ve got old folks and kids with us. It’d be bad luck to—”

Xue Xian, who’d been determined to play dead, heard his hesitation and promptly lifted the black cloth, interrupting the man.

“Not dead. Alive and well,” he drawled.

Jiang Shining turned away, thinking that if they were mistaken for lunatics and denied a ride, it would be quite the spectacle.

To his surprise, the scar-faced man had a strong tolerance for the unexpected. He made silent eye contact with Xue Xian, then inspected Xue

Xian's pale skin and Xuanmin's impassive face. Concluding that they probably wouldn't cause trouble, he nodded.

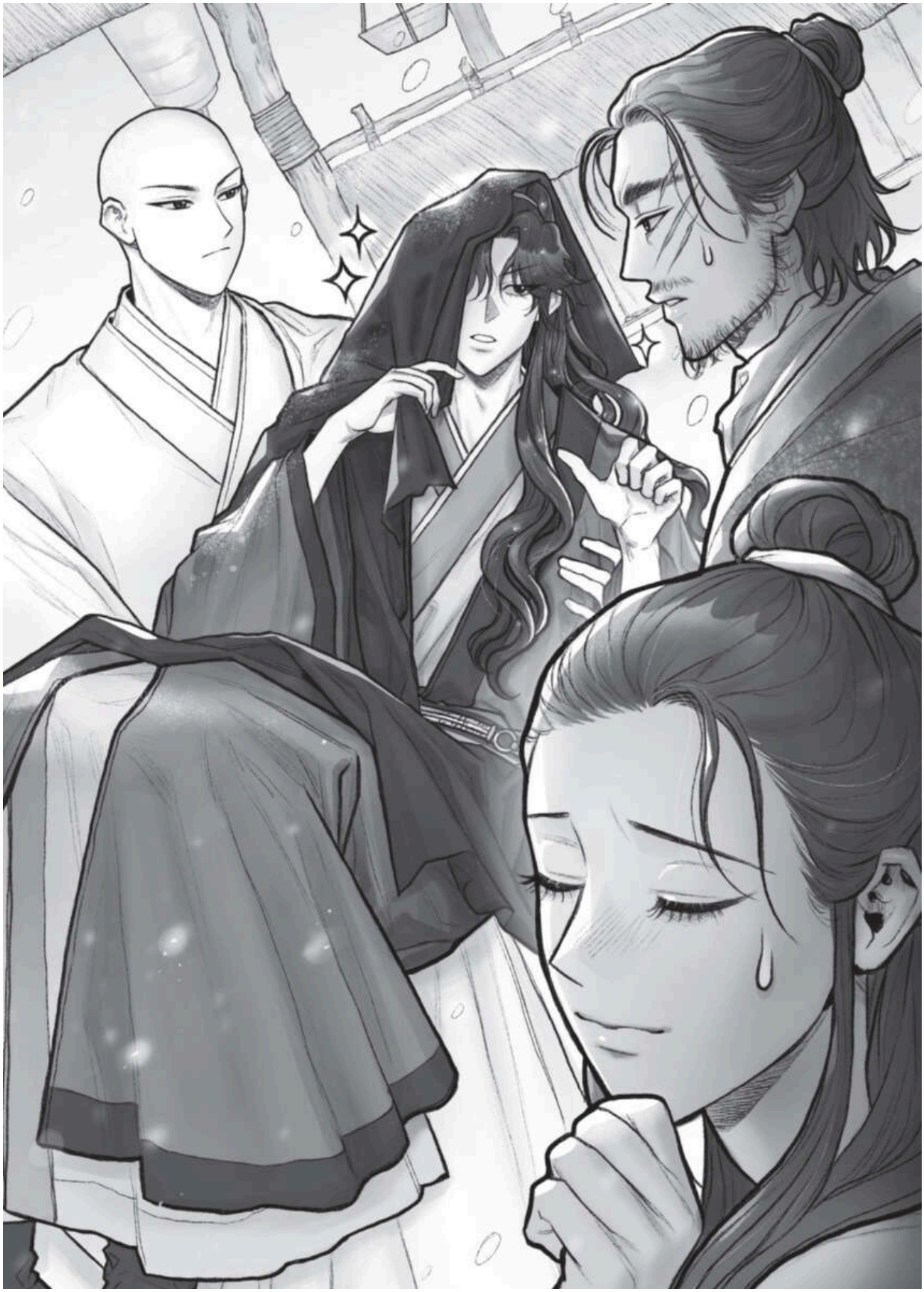
"All right, let's not waste time. Hurry up. The snow will get heavier later, and the road will become harder to navigate."

The scar-faced man's group consisted of three carriages and one donkey cart. The carriages were spacious enough to seat four each, while the donkey cart hauled their luggage and miscellaneous items. Jiang Shining stood by the small convoy and was about to ask the scar-faced man what they did for a living when a lukewarm hand pressed down on his arm. He jumped and turned to see Xuanmin standing beside him, while the hand on his arm was Xue Xian's.

Xue Xian lifted the black cloth to reveal one eye and gave Jiang Shining a meaningful look. Pressing a finger to his lips, he whispered, "Don't ask, and don't startle them. Just get on the carriage but keep your distance."

Perhaps it was due to the softness of Xue Xian's voice, but Jiang Shining felt a chill run down his spine.

Despite his ferocious appearance, the scar-faced man was genuinely kindhearted. In fact, everyone in his group was warm and helpful regardless of age or gender. Once Jiang Shining explained their situation, they not only readily agreed to help, but also made space for them unprompted, offering an entire empty carriage to Xue Xian and the others.



The mountain roads were treacherous to navigate on a snowy day like this one. To ensure no one was left behind, the carriages were tied together with ropes, one bound to the next, with the donkey cart carrying their belongings bringing up the rear.

The scar-faced man tightly wrapped his head and face and tucked a flask of strong liquor into his robes. He sat at the front of the lead carriage and called out to the others to remove the wooden blocks from the wheels.

"Let's go. Hold on tight," he shouted to the back before ushering the carriage forward.

Xue Xian and company rested in the third carriage. Although it was designed for four, it wasn't too crowded with five passengers. Jiang Shining's skinny frame and Lu Nianqi being around average size for a child meant ample space for everyone.

Xuanmin usually kept to himself, and no one other than Xue Xian dared to provoke him. Naturally, everyone in the carriage avoided him. As for Xue Xian and Shitou Zhang, the latter behaved like a mouse in front of a cat. Every time Xue Xian glanced his way, Shitou Zhang's scalp zinged, as if a bolt of lightning might strike him at any moment. When they seated themselves, Shitou Zhang, Lu Nianqi, and Jiang Shining tacitly chose to sit on one side, leaving the other side for the two wise ones no one dared to offend.

Xue Xian pulled away the black cloth covering his head and face, sat up straight, and looked around. "I really must thank you," he said to Shitou Zhang and the others, with an icy smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Shitou Zhang turned his head away with a mournful expression. *Why single me out when there are three of us?*

The scar-faced man's group had clearly traveled far and wide. The horses and donkeys pulling the carriages had developed great vigor from their journeys. With just the scar-faced man controlling the direction and speed of the lead carriage, the others plodded behind, requiring no extra effort to keep them moving.

The carriage was also well equipped. The curtains over the windows were lined with thick felt, heavy enough to block the wind and stop them from being blown open. Between the seats was a narrow wooden table on either side, just the right height—not too low to cramp their legs, but enough to hold a few items. A half-moon iron bracket holding a small oil lamp was nailed to one corner of the carriage, ready to be lit at any time. On either side were neatly folded thin blankets, the kind old people used to cover their knees and legs in winter to keep out the cold.

"They've got everything here," Shitou Zhang remarked after peering around. "They must be people who are always on the road. The carriage seems like their home."

Before boarding, an old woman from the scar-faced man's group had kindly given them a copper warming stove, saying it would keep the carriage warm. She also handed over a small bundle. "There's some dry food inside, and there's wine in the carriage. If you get cold, have some with the wine to warm up. We'll be passing through two mountain paths. The roads are slippery in the snow, and we might not reach the next town before dark. Don't go hungry."

Shitou Zhang had said, "No need, no need. We wouldn't think of it," but he clung tightly to the copper stove without a hint of shame.

The carriage was warmer than the outside, but not by much. Shitou Zhang warmed his frozen fingers by the copper stove, his eyes frequently drifting toward the folded blankets. However, since Lu Nianqi and Jiang Shining were between him and those blankets, he would have to conspicuously reach over the two to get them. And he didn't want to do anything to attract Xue Xian's attention.

After a moment of thought, Shitou Zhang turned to Lu Nianqi. "Grab a blanket. We can share one, put the stove in the middle, and warm our knees. How about it?"

Lu Nianqi automatically glanced at him. Though his expression didn't outright show disdain, it was implied anyway. "There's no need. I'm not cold. You can keep it for yourself."

Unwilling to let go of the stove, Shitou Zhang gestured to Lu Nianqi's hands with his chin. "Look at your fingers. They're freezing. Have you ever had frostbite? This damp, cold weather will give it to you quick if you don't keep your hands warm. They'll itch, swell, and even crack. If they form on your joints, it'll be even worse. Every time you bend your fingers, the sores will split open, and the flesh will peel back. You—"

Lu Nianqi's mouth twitched, and without a word, he pulled a thin blanket from the side and tossed it onto his knees. "Just stop talking, please." The way he spoke was a mix of Lu Nianqi and Lu Shijiu, as if a stubborn, unruly core was wrapped in a more restrained exterior.

Shitou Zhang didn't mind the disrespectful tone. He happily arranged the blanket over their knees and tucked the copper stove underneath. The heat from the stove quickly warmed the blanket, and that warmth seeped into their legs and knees that were almost numb from the cold. It was

incredibly comfortable. Even the stubborn Lu Nianqi saw some color returning to his pale, frozen face. After a while, he moved his fingers and slipped them under the blanket to warm them.

"There you go," Shitou Zhang said. "You're still young. What are you embarrassed by? Being cold isn't something to be ashamed of."

Lu Nianqi turned away, tuning out his chatter.

"If you don't keep your knees warm at this age, you won't be able to walk when you're old," Shitou Zhang continued in a know-it-all tone. Since he entered the carriage, his mouth had buzzed like a fly. He was quite the character.

However, as soon as he finished speaking, he realized something was off. He looked up and met Xue Xian's gaze—the wise one who…couldn't walk. Shitou Zhang's face stiffened, and he shrank back, coughing. "I-I'll stop talking. No more talking."

Once he was quiet, Jiang Shining, who had been silent all this time, rubbed his temples and spoke softly. "Earlier, by the carriage, you stopped my hand and told me not to ask questions. What did you mean? Are they…" He instinctively glanced through the gap in the felt curtain and lowered his voice. "Are they suspicious? Why did we get on the carriage, then?"

Shitou Zhang chimed in first. "They're not bandits, are they? They gave us a warming stove and food. They can't be that bad." After speaking, he slapped his own mouth. "That's the last out of me. I really won't talk anymore."

Lu Nianqi rolled his eyes, clearly fed up with the chatterbox, but he held his tongue and kept up Lu Shijiu's aloof demeanor.

Xue Xian sat for a while before he began rummaging through the carriage's corner for the wine the old woman had mentioned.

"There are some taboos here that I can't explain," he said as he searched. "But I did catch a glimpse of something earlier—two of the bundles in the donkey cart weren't tightly tied, and some fabric spilled out."

"Oh, I saw that too," Jiang Shining said. "It was colorful. Have you ever seen an opera? I think those clothes looked like opera costumes."

Xue Xian found the wine jug and began warming it, the liquid bubbling as it boiled. "This wine smells good," he muttered. "Anyway, why would I watch operas? Are they more entertaining than me?"

Fair point, Jiang Shining thought. *You're more dramatic than any opera.*

"Can I say one more thing?" Shitou Zhang asked.

"Who's stopping you? Did someone pull out your tongue?" Xue Xian snapped. "Just get to the point."

"When they were loading and unloading the donkey cart earlier, I wandered over and took a look," Shitou Zhang said. "This young gentleman is right. The donkey cart is filled with props—gongs, drums, and the like. They're definitely an opera troupe, people who have no fixed home and travel around performing. The scar-faced man is probably the troupe leader. And I sized up the others—there's someone to play a young female role, an old female role, a young male role, a main male role, a painted-face role, and a clown. The troupe has just enough members to put on a sizeable performance. They've got everything."

There *were* many opera troupes in the Anqing Prefecture area. Some performed in established theaters, sheltered from the elements, and enjoyed relatively comfortable lives. Others, however, had no fixed stage and traveled far and wide. They'd set up makeshift stages on street corners or in village squares and put on impromptu shows there. Only the more renowned troupes were invited to perform in proper theaters.

"That gentleman said they were also heading toward Qingping County," Jiang Shining said. "If there are taboos, let's not discuss them. Since you didn't stop us from getting on the carriage, traveling together for a while shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"As long as we don't take any forbidden paths, there shouldn't be any trouble," Xue Xian replied.

He tossed the scalding wine jug onto the small wooden table. Shitou Zhang stealthily reached out to take it, but just as his hand neared the jug, Xuanmin flicked his finger. Shitou Zhang felt something strike what felt like a nerve on his wrist and his hand went limp.

"This wine isn't for drinking," Xuanmin said coldly, not even looking at him.

"Huh?" Shitou Zhang was startled. His mind raced with countless thoughts. He awkwardly pulled back his hand and glanced at the bundle of dry food the old woman had given them. "What about this food?"

"Go ahead and eat it. Once you're done, we'll have more space in the carriage," Xue Xian said.

Shitou Zhang was stumped.

Xue Xian shook his hand, visibly irritated. The heat inside his body kept rising and rising. It wasn't as unbearable as when he was in his tiny dragon form, but it wasn't comfortable. He had to gather the heat in his palms before finding something cool to dissipate it. If it built up and couldn't be released, his temper would flare. He stared at the carriage roof, feigning indifference as he placed his hand under the table and gripped one of its legs.

About ten minutes later, the carriage jolted. Jiang Shining and the other two fell forward, instinctively bracing themselves against the copper-edged table. Jiang Shining hissed in pain, sucking in a sharp breath, while Shitou Zhang outright yelped.

Lu Nianqi quickly pulled his hand back and shot Xue Xian a glance. "If you keep this up, the table's edges are going to get scorched."

The perpetrator pretended not to hear. He stared at the gap in the curtain, but he did retract his hand to rest it on the edge of the seat.

Another ten minutes passed, and Xuanmin shook his head. He grabbed Xue Xian's wrist and lifted his scorching hand. "Enough. Use something else to dissipate your heat."

If this kept up, could they even keep sitting there? Xue Xian thought for a moment and pressed his hand against the carriage door.

Before long, the entire carriage began to warm up—then, it started to get hot.

Lu Nianqi propped his head up. Without a word, he tossed the blanket off his knees and shoved the copper warming stove into Shitou Zhang's arms. Jiang Shining quietly lifted the curtain by the window, sneaking a few

breaths of fresh air. For a ghost accustomed to cold and darkness, such high temperatures were unbearable.

They felt like steamed buns in a bamboo steamer, already cooked on the outside, and the filling was about to be done.

The stifling heat continued for a while until Xuanmin spoke up. “If it gets any hotter, we might end up with three empty seats.”

The three steamed buns turned pale and glared at Xue Xian. He idly but mercifully withdrew his hand.

He then reached for the lamp, but Xuanmin intercepted him halfway, gripping his wrist. The thin porcelain lamp might shatter if exposed to such heat.

Xue Xian tried to touch the iron clasp on the door, but Xuanmin stopped him again. As if they could let him heat the door clasp! If it warped, the door wouldn’t open.

After being thwarted several times, with Xuanmin always playing the villain, Xue Xian snapped. He shot Xuanmin a sidelong glare, then thrust both hands into Xuanmin’s collar. “If you keep stopping me, I’ll boil you alive once I lose my mind from the heat. Believe it or not!”

Xuanmin was silent. The three across from them stared in shock, but no one dared to speak. If they did, they’d be the next ones with their necks grabbed. They all lowered their eyes and became very familiar with the floor.

This situation couldn’t go on; it was about to erupt…

In the turmoil, the horse in the front let out a sharp whinny. The scar-faced man shouted “Whoa!” and began soothing the horse. “Shh, shh, don’t

be afraid."

The carriages behind them came to an abrupt halt, and the horses snorted irritably.

"Why did we suddenly stop?" Jiang Shining choked out. "Did we run into trouble?" He looked at Xue Xian gloomily. "What was it you said earlier? As long as we don't do something, there won't be trouble? Surely… we're not *that* unlucky, are we?"

Ever since Xue Xian's mysterious warning, Jiang Shining had been on edge, fearing the worst. But as the saying went: What you fear most is what you get.

The road from Guanyin Crossing to the northern county was lined with low hills. The mountain paths were difficult to navigate due to the snow, and some roads were sealed off, forcing them to take detours. This was exactly what the scar-faced man had encountered. The front carriage had come to a halt in a precarious spot. The jagged edge of a collapsed cliff loomed mere feet away. In the past, two bridges had spanned the gap, leading to two separate mountain trails—one heading east and the other west—allowing travelers to bypass the impassable mountain ahead.

"Did we run into something?" Having vented his anger throttling Xuanmin, Xue Xian was feeling a little calmer. He pretended nothing had happened and pushed open the carriage door to lean outside.

"Do you need any help?" he asked.

The scar-faced man shouted back, "It's nothing. The bridge we planned to cross is broken. We'll have to take the other mountain path…"

The lead horse kept snorting nervously at the edge of the cliff. If the scar-faced man hadn't stopped in time, it might have tumbled over the edge.

An old man got out of the carriage in front. "How did the bridge break so suddenly? Are you sure we're on the right path? I told you we should've let me lead the way."

"Old Man Li, stop nagging. I know this road," the scar-faced man said. "Get back in the carriage. No need to come out and risk catching a cold. You'll ruin your singing voice."

Xue Xian saw that Old Man Li didn't return to the carriage as instructed. Instead, the old man trudged through the snow to the lead carriage, took a look, and exclaimed, "What a disaster! It's completely broken… Do we really have to take the eastern path?"

Both Old Man Li and the scar-faced man seemed reluctant to take the eastern path, as if doing so would strip eight hundred years off their lives.

"Is the eastern path difficult?" Xue Xian asked. He had made out their conversation with his exceptional hearing. He didn't raise his voice, but the mountain wind carried his words clearly to the two men at the front.

They paused.

"It's fine, don't worry. The eastern path is just a bit longer, and there are often rockslides," the scar-faced man shouted back. "But if we're careful, we can make it through."

Jiang Shining, still inside the carriage, grew worried. "Are you *sure* it's safe?"

Xue Xian peered through the snow at the expressions of the two men up front, then slowly shook his head. "They don't seem too concerned,

but…it's hard to say. Let's follow them for now."

Beside him, Xuanmin, who had said few words, lifted the curtain. "It's fine. I'll keep an eye out."

His voice was calm and steady, soothing everyone in the carriage somehow. Even Xue Xian, who had been at odds with him for days, had to admit that the bald donkey might have his flaws, but he was a robust problem solver.

As soon as this thought crossed his mind, Xue Xian fell into deep contemplation: Why had he described Xuanmin as "robust"? Such a descriptor was usually reserved for an object one owned—you had to hold it in your hand before you could consider it robust, right?

Xue Xian clung to the carriage door, his face flat, and pondered for a few more seconds before concluding that he must have eaten something strange.

Xuanmin was a mere mortal. Once Xue Xian regained his true dragon form, he could easily manipulate the monk. He could not only grasp Xuanmin with his claws but also consume him with a single bite. Who cared how robust he was?!

Xue Xian, as shameless as always, felt he was fully justified. Having played out a dramatic battle between man and dragon in his mind, Xue Xian shot a glare at Xuanmin inside the carriage.

Unaware of Xue Xian's mental theatrics, Xuanmin found the look directed at him rather puzzling. He was aloof by nature, and he rarely paid attention to the subtle expressions of others. He assumed Xue Xian was just overheated and irritable, so he chose not to provoke him further and returned his focus to the view outside the curtain.

This act of indifference only added fuel to Xue Xian's inner fire. He felt an inexplicable itch in his hands whenever he saw Xuanmin's frosty, immovable demeanor. He wanted to pick a fight even though he knew it was unreasonable. He had known Xuanmin long enough to be accustomed to his unflappable nature. It still didn't sit well with Xue Xian! He felt like there was a rush of energy flowing through his meridians, only to become blocked at a specific spot. It didn't hurt, it was just…undeniably unsettling.

The heat inside his body surged once again, rising in waves that rolled upward one after another. Each time, any relief was brief, and it felt as if the cycle would never truly end.

Damn it.

The scar-faced man tugged at the reins, trying to guide the lead horse onto the eastern bridge. However, the horse was even more irritable than Xue Xian. It snorted and whinnied incessantly, pacing back and forth at the cliff's edge, refusing to take a step forward.

"We've tried whipping it, coaxing it, and tricking it," Old Man Li muttered. "Why won't it move? It's never done this before—this is too odd."

"It's being particularly stubborn today. They say horses are intuitive. Maybe the earlier close call frightened it, and it doesn't trust the way forward," the scar-faced man said.

Still, he patted the horse's neck, alternating between soft words and firm tugging, finally convincing the reluctant horse to take a step. The wheels began to turn slowly.

Old Man Li hurried back to his carriage, though his expression was still heavy with worry. Before getting in, he happened to glance at Xue Xian

and offered a reassuring smile. “It’s fine. The horse was just being difficult. Now that we’re moving, everything will be fine.”

The temporary setback seemed resolved. It was troublesome but far better than the ominous scenarios Jiang Shining and the others had been imagining. Xue Xian nodded at Old Man Li in acknowledgment, then closed the carriage door and leaned back with his arms crossed. He no longer had the urge to dissipate his heat using Xuanmin, nor did he feel like talking. He looked unusually languid.

The bridge they were crossing was actually broader than the one that had collapsed. The horses and donkeys drew the carriages slowly, and with ample room on both sides, the crossing wasn’t particularly perilous.

However, once they were on the other side, the lead horse kept stopping and starting. From time to time, they could hear the scar-faced man alternating between soothing the horse and scolding it. The sounds of its hooves, wheels crunching through snow, and the occasional crack of a whip blended together, growing more troubling the further they traveled.

“Is everything all right? I can’t relax one bit,” Jiang Shining said, fidgeting in his seat, his face clouded. He was usually slow and deliberate, so he seemed like a different person in this state.

His fretting continued for a while, until he realized something really *was* off. “Why have I been so anxious since we came to this mountain?”

“Heavy yin energy,” Xue Xian said.

His tone was devoid of emotion, which was rare for him. More often, his words were laced with sarcasm or taunting and laden with implications. Anyone listening to him would know he was a troublemaker. It was rare to hear him speak so neutrally. The tension increased inside the carriage.

Jiang Shining thought it best to keep quiet, lest he provoke the wise one. But Xue Xian's brief response only deepened his unease. What did he mean by "heavy yin energy"?

Xue Xian didn't elaborate, but Lu Nianqi, stroking the wooden twigs in his hand, did.

"If I recall, the boatman said there was an earthquake in Anqing Prefecture, and a mountain collapsed."

"Huh?" Jiang Shining turned to Lu Nianqi.

He stared back with an eerie expression. "Do you think there might still be people buried under the mountain?"

Jiang Shining was speechless. Was the kid trying to scare him on purpose? That line sounded way too much like something from a ghost story.

"You're just a kid!" Shitou Zhang wailed like he was about to cry. "Don't pick up bad habits and go around scaring people like that!"

Lu Nianqi rolled his eyes in a restrained manner and continued to fiddle with his wooden branch.

Xue Xian's palms were almost scalding, yet he remained still. He leaned back with heavily lidded eyes, showing no intention of stirring up trouble. This uncharacteristic behavior made everyone in the carriage uneasy. Everyone went quiet. Perhaps it was Jiang Shining's imagination, but the lull felt almost stifling.

They made their way along the mountain path at a snail's pace. The horse started out at an occasional trot, but soon it slowed to a walk. Eventually, it was barely inching along.

After about half an hour, they had only made it halfway up the mountain.

Xuanmin kept the curtain lifted with his fingers, his gaze calm as he looked outside. His silence provided some reassurance to Jiang Shining and the others.

Xue Xian's palms were terribly hot, but he showed no intention of finding something to cool them. Once he lost the urge to cause trouble, everything felt dull and uninteresting. The heat wasn't completely unbearable.

Let them burn if they want to, he thought indifferently.

Just as the burning sensation began to spread from his wrists to other parts of his body, a slender hand appeared in his field of vision. Startled, Xue Xian looked up to see Xuanmin beside him. The monk's right hand held the edge of the curtain and his gaze stayed fixed on the outside, but his left hand was extended toward Xue Xian, palm up.

Xue Xian's heart skipped a beat, but he quickly composed himself.

"Why are you showing off your hand?" he said in an even voice.

Xuanmin finally looked at Xue Xian briefly, then at his folded arms. "Don't you need something to cool down with?"

He turned back to the outside, but his hand remained outstretched, waiting.

The blocked energy started flowing smoothly again.

Still clinging to the shreds of his aloof facade, Xue Xian eyed the proffered hand. He bit his tongue and scowled as if deep in thought.

“Fine,” he said at last, though it sounded reluctant. “In honor of you saying something sensible…I won’t hold back!”

With that, he shamelessly extended both hands. One gripped Xuanmin’s palm, and the other attempted to reach for Xuanmin’s face—only to be swatted away.

As the heat dissipated some, Xue Xian sighed in relief.

Xuanmin, still observing the outside, frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Xue Xian asked. He leaned over Xuanmin to peer through the gap in the curtain.

The mountain path curved, and from their position, they could see a section of the lower path blocked by a pile of rocks from a landslide. The debris was a chaotic mess, and beneath it lay a number of crushed objects.

Unable to resist his curiosity, Jiang Shining also leaned out. He nearly strained his neck trying to see from his awkward position. “I think… that’s a carriage under there. Could there still be people inside?!”

“It’s a carriage,” Xue Xian agreed, then added ominously, “Take a closer look. Does that carriage seem familiar to you?”

Jiang Shining was alarmed. He hesitated before he understood why Xue Xian had warned them not to get too familiar with the scar-faced man.

“You’re saying…they… They’re all—”

“Shh,” Xue Xian interrupted. “When dealing with such people, certain words are taboo. Say them and they’ll wake up. And don’t let them see…” Xue Xian gestured toward the curtain with his chin. “Otherwise, we’ll have no peace.”

But the carriage was heading straight for the scene. The mountain path was narrow and offered no way to turn back. Jiang Shining's heart sank. "How can we avoid that?!"

The climate in the area was damp and cold, but snow didn't accumulate quickly. Only a thin layer covered the mountain path, which had been trampled by earlier travelers. In some places, it had turned into thin ice, making the path slippery. The lead horse continued to neigh, only moving a few steps after being whipped, its progress intermittent. Even with their slow pace, it wouldn't be long before they reached the section of the path obstructed by piles of rubble.

"Do they really…have no idea at all?" Jiang Shining stiffened like he was holding his breath. He waited for Xue Xian or Xuanmin to respond.

"It's not that they're completely unaware. Look at them—" Xue Xian gestured toward the front of the procession with his chin. "That horse hasn't settled down yet. When we had to change routes because of the broken bridge, both the scar-faced man and Old Man Li were troubled by the idea and unwilling to do it. They probably have some subconscious aversion to this place."

People who sensed misfortune always tried to avoid it, whether they knew it or not.

Despite his partial paralysis, Xue Xian refused to sit still. While he couldn't stand up to look outside, he leaned sideways on his seat, craning his neck to peek through the curtain. Xuanmin had to lean back against the carriage wall to make room for him. The hand that had initially been offered to help him cool down was now supporting his entire upper body to help with his balance.

Xuanmin had captured Xue Xian with the goal of vanquishing an evil spirit, yet their relationship had evolved into something unexpected. Truly, the twists of fate were unpredictable.

Jiang Shining remained seated and gripped his robe, betraying his unease. Lu Nianqi's knee brushed against his, and the former could feel Jiang Shining's restlessness. Unable to resist, he glanced over with his near-blind eyes and said, "I've never seen a ghost who's afraid of ghosts before."

"And you weren't the one crying for your dad in the tomb, huh?" Jiang Shining retorted.

Lu Nianqi was stunned by the rebuttal, then snorted and twisted his head away, refraining from further mockery. He was young, and his courage often faltered. Nevertheless, he carried the pride of a stubborn teenager, so he always strove to put on a brave face. What'd happened in the underground tomb chamber on Fentou Island had pushed him to his breaking point, revealing his true self.

In contrast, Lu Shijiu had seen things that ordinary people couldn't since he'd been a child. He was accustomed to supernatural phenomena and wasn't afraid of such things. Lu Nianqi had since inherited Lu Shijiu's temperament, so he could stay calm in this situation.

After being mocked, Jiang Shining also kept to himself. This left Shitou Zhang in a difficult position. Now that he knew Jiang Shining was also a ghost, he buzzed with anxiety. He scanned the carriage with a complex expression in his beady eyes. There were five people in this carriage, and aside from him, the other four were all supernatural beings. And the carriages ahead, as well as the people and horses pulling them, were animated by unnatural forces…

Good heavens, just what was happening to him?!

Shitou Zhang almost burst into tears. Tightly clutching the hand warmer, he pressed himself as far as he could against the carriage wall, as though he might flatten his round, quail-like body and erase his presence.

Xue Xian was still staring out. “One more thing—wait for the carriage to move forward a bit more.”

While they were talking, the entire caravan had moved forward a short distance. The rubble that had once been far off was drawing nearer, soon to be right beneath them. When their carriage arrived directly above the debris, it would be easy to step out and climb down to the lower mountain path, landing squarely on the pile of rubble.

The closer they got to the rubble, the more restless the horses became. The scar-faced man’s voice could be heard, switching between coaxing and scolding. Perhaps it was due to everyone’s heightened sensitivity, but his tone grew more impatient. The carriages ahead were no longer as quiet as before. Faint murmurs drifted over on the wind. The atmosphere made it impossible to relax.

“Um, do you think they might decide to look down at the lower path?” Jiang Shining couldn’t help but ask.

“No,” Xuanmin replied succinctly.

He always spoke in this manner; he rarely explained his words and stated only the most crucial points. His decisiveness was reassuring at times like this, as it left no room for doubt.

Jiang Shining was somewhat relieved, but Shitou Zhang asked, “How can you be so sure?”

“Because *they’re* scared too! Stop asking so many questions.” Xue Xian was still staring out of the carriage without looking at him. “I think the only lean meat on your body is your tongue. It moves so much, it’d be perfect sliced up and served with wine.”

Served with wine… Xuanmin frowned. Xue Xian didn’t just snap at people—he went out of his way to disgust all the onlookers too.

He glanced out of the curtain before patting Xue Xian’s shoulder with his other hand. “I’m going out for a bit.”

Startled, Xue Xian leaned forward. “You’ll do it?”

“Mm.” He would much prefer to step outside rather than remain in the carriage, forced to listen to nonsensical comments that could kill anyone’s appetite for ten days straight.

“Can you handle it?” Xue Xian narrowed his eyes. “The carriage is slow, but it’s just one loop. Will you have enough time?”

Xuanmin pressed down on Xue Xian’s shoulder, pushing him away from the curtain and into his seat where he was out of the way. Then, he unfastened the string of copper coins from his waist and stepped over Xue Xian.

He was tall, and the carriage roof was low, forcing him to bend slightly. Supporting himself with the hand Xue Xian was holding for support, he stepped out of the carriage. His monk’s robes fluttered like a wintry gust of wind, and in the next moment he disappeared.

Shitou Zhang was still pressed against the carriage wall, and he watched this all in shock. Then, he pulled up the curtain. He saw a white

figure soar down the cliffside like a wisp of cloud or snow, whisper-silent. Not even a single pebble tumbled after him.

Everyone in the carriage was momentarily awed by Xuanmin's ethereal demeanor—except for Xue Xian. He clicked his tongue, thinking it was passable, though not quite as impressive as his own.

He shifted to occupy Xuanmin's former spot, then lifted the curtain to stare intently at Xuanmin's movements on the mountain path.

Xuanmin landed on top of the rubble, his feet balancing on the tip of a stone no larger than a palm. There wasn't so much as a tremor. He looked up at the cliff. Between the upper and lower paths, a large section of the cliff was missing—it lent the upper path a precarious look, as if it might collapse under too much weight.

The missing section now rested beneath Xuanmin's feet. The rubble, with rocks close to the height of a person, had fallen suddenly. Even an iron carriage would have been crushed, let alone a wooden one. Aside from a few corners of the carriage and the blue cloth curtain, everything else was buried under the rubble and crushed beyond recognition. The bodies would not have been intact if dug out.

After a moment of contemplation, Xuanmin made his decision.

Xue Xian wasn't the only one watching his every move. Shitou Zhang and Jiang Shining had also gathered by the curtain. Even Lu Nianqi couldn't resist peeking out.

"What are you craning your neck for? Can your eyes see better after sleeping for a few days?" Xue Xian snapped.

“Thanks for your concern, but unfortunately, they’ve gotten worse,” Lu Nianqi replied blandly. The blurrier his vision, the closer he came to complete blindness. What he could see were auras, but the outlines formed by these auras had grown less clear.

Xue Xian was quite curious about that change. As a divine being with vision far superior to that of ordinary humans, he found it hard to imagine what the world looked like through Lu Shijiu’s—now Lu Nianqi’s—eyes.

“At this distance, you can’t tell humans from animals,” Lu Nianqi said. Ostensibly, he was describing his own vision, but it didn’t sound quite natural. It seemed more like a veiled jab at *someone*.

“You’ve got some nerve.” Xue Xian snorted, then continued to watch Xuanmin. From his vantage point, he could see every move the monk made.

It was said that certain legendary demonic blades needed blood to awaken. Once awakened, they became sharp and cold, capable of cutting through wind and water. Xuanmin’s copper coins weren’t sharp, nor did they have an edge, yet they also required blood to awaken. Xue Xian watched Xuanmin slice open his finger again and smear the blood along the edge of the coins.

A low hum resonated as they seemed to come alive. They jittered, emitting a faint, mournful sound amid the wind and snow. The sound grated on Xue Xian’s ears. He frowned.

Xuanmin positioned the five coins in his left palm to the east, south, west, north, and then the center. He next produced a few sheets of yellow paper used for drawing talismans, though they were blank. He bent down, folded the paper, and placed four sheets on the rubble, facing the four directions. Then, he began to rotate the coins in his palm with his fingers,

his pale lips moving slightly as if reciting a mantra. It didn't look like he was reciting a full sentence—just a short phrase.

The coins, though merely resting on his palm, seemed to have rooted themselves. They fought against being turned.

Once the mantra was done, Xuanmin slowly rotated the eastern coin. As he did so, thin, bloodred lines began to appear on the talisman paper facing east. An invisible hand seemed to be writing on the talisman with a brush dipped in cinnabar. The intricate runes were completed in one stroke, finishing just as Xuanmin turned the coin halfway.

Next was the south, then the north, and finally the west…

The moment the four talismans were completed, a fierce wind rose from the ground, howling like a tiger.

The thick felt curtain was whipped by the wind, flapping violently and slapping Shitou Zhang several times across the face. For a moment, he felt transcendently unlucky. He rubbed at his stinging face and lifted the curtain all the way up, exposing the opening to the wind. Fine, frigid snow churned inside, whipped up by the blustering winds.

The snow was so piercingly cold that Shitou Zhang and Jiang Shining could barely keep their eyes open. They had to blink and shield their foreheads with their hands before they could see the scene on the mountain path again.

Shitou Zhang gasped in shock.

The wind summoned by Xuanmin had lifted the entire section of the path into the air, along with the rubble and the carriages beneath it. The debris floated intact, carried by the wind toward the void beside the path.

Underneath the suspended mass, Xuanmin—still standing atop the rubble—lifted his left foot and stomped lightly.

The debris and carriages beneath his feet suddenly plummeted into the deep valley as if weighed down by a thousand pounds. Seconds later, a faint rumbling sound echoed from the valley.

“Huh? Is he trying to blow up the mountain?” Shitou Zhang muttered.

“He should’ve grabbed you and blown you up with them,” Xue Xian snarled. “He’s probably *burying* them.”

As Xue Xian guessed, the impact of the rubble hitting the ground was immense. The soft mud in the valley had already been gouged into a deep pit; the carriages and the bodies, now unrecognizable, fell into the pit. The rubble formed a burial mound.

The exposed stone settled and was swiftly covered in the snow swept in by the wind. Everything took on a soft, pale white, as if a layer of paper money had been scattered over a mound of yellow earth.

Xuanmin retrieved the coins, lit a match, and burned the yellow talisman papers.

It was a simple burial.

He wiped the remaining bloodstains from the coins and hung them back on his waist. Facing the stone mound, he made a solemn Buddhist mudra with one hand. The hem of his cloudlike monk’s robes billowed in the wind before dropping back into place, and he faded into the forest of the deep valley.

For Xuanmin, climbing back up the cliff was no harder than descending it. In a few leaps, he was back on the mountain path where the rubble had been. The carriage had just completed its loop and was turning toward them. The scar-faced man's voice carried over, and the lead horse was just a few steps away from coming into view.

To avoid being seen, Xuanmin stepped onto the cliff and began to circle around. However, he noticed a pile of rubble slightly off to the side, with two people trapped beneath it, their faces obscured.

This pile had been hidden by the jagged cliff, invisible from where Xuanmin had initially descended. It seemed that when the caravan had been struck by the rubble, two quick-footed individuals had managed to escape, only to be caught by another wave of falling rocks just as they made it behind the mountain wall.

The carriage was approaching, and there was no time for Xuanmin to descend and draw another talisman.

At this critical moment, a black dragon emerged from the other side of the mountain path.

This wise one was grandiose in whatever he did. Two bolts of dark lightning struck the top of the rocks pinning the people down. With a resounding crack, the stones shattered into countless fragments. Wrapped in a whirling gale, the black dragon moved its head in a broad sweep, and the wind carried both corpses and stone powder down the cliff, tearing through the pine forest with a shriek.

Whoosh!

The wind died down, and the trees stilled. The remaining two bodies

fell into the valley. The dust settled over them like sand.

"Whoa!" The scar-faced man, startled by the sudden wind, pulled on the reins. Once the wind passed, he flicked the whip again.

When the restless horses reached that fateful section and were met with nothing but empty ground, they immediately calmed down. The steady clip-clop of hooves echoed through the mountains as they passed the section Xuanmin had cleared. They turned toward the jagged cliff.

Xue Xian, lacking both the ability to move and feel his lower half, used his upper body to climb along the cliff. He lifted himself onto the upper path to avoid the scar-faced man's line of sight.

Unfortunately, his tail landed carelessly. As the scar-faced man guided the carriage around the cliff, the accursed tip of Xue Xian's tail slipped over the edge, dangling like a fishing line right in front of the caravan.

Xuanmin was standing on the same path as Xue Xian. He walked over to the wise one's tail and quietly lifted the offending tip out of the way.

It was quite a tableau. On one side was the motionless black dragon pressing itself against the mountain path. On another was the scar-faced man, immobile, feeling as if he were dreaming. And on the third side was the young monk, holding someone's tail tip, gazing calmly down the mountain. The three points formed a delicate balance, like a frozen painting.

For a moment, no one moved. A split second stretched into what felt like a century.

The scar-faced man was the first to act. His looked around in a daze as he peered up at the jagged cliff. He did this for a long time. Above him,

there was nothing but fine snow and the overcast sky. No sign of a living creature.

He recalled what he'd seen: thick at one end, tapering to a point, covered in scales, and perhaps something else… He could not remember it exactly, but whatever it was had swayed before his nose a few times and almost hit his face.

How could something so large disappear in an instant?

Someone from the carriage behind him lifted the curtain and called out. "Boss, why have we stopped? Are the horses acting up again?"

The scar-faced man snapped out of his daze. He shook his head vigorously, trying to dispel the strange image from his mind. He convinced himself that it must have been the fatigue from the long journey causing him to see things.

With that thought, he took a swig from his wine flask. The wine wasn't from the south; it was more like the strong, fiery liquor from beyond the northern wall. It burned his throat and warmed his chest, reigniting his vigor.

"Tch." He glanced upward one more time, then flicked the whip, urging the horses forward.

As the beat of hooves faded into the distance, the black dragon lying on the mountain path rolled its eyes and went to let out a long sigh. But a dragon's breath was no ordinary exhalation; a slight puff could stir up a fierce mountain wind. To avoid drawing attention and to quickly dispel the scar-faced man's suspicions, Xue Xian caught his breath at the last second and almost suffocated himself.

Xue Xian sprang back to life like he hadn't been the crisis in the making pressed against the mountain path moments ago. He raised his long body and looked down at Xuanmin standing by his tail.

"See? I had to step in to clean up your mess," Xue Xian scoffed. "If I hadn't acted so fast, that scar-faced man would be staring at his own corpse right now."

How full of himself. Xuanmin had been about to let go of the tail tip, but now he paused and straightened up. He didn't say a word, just continued holding the tip of the tail. His expression was cool and detached, as if he had all day for Xue Xian to repeat his boasting.

Xue Xian shot a fierce glare at the tip of the tail, tempted to slice it off. This troublesome thing! When it was small, the bald donkey would endlessly fiddle with it; even when it had returned to its original size, it still couldn't escape the monk's clutches. What good was it, huh?!

He glared at Xuanmin, and Xuanmin met his eyes evenly. Xuanmin had not let go of Xue Xian's tail. He was clearly waiting for him to retract his audacious claim.

With his tail in Xuanmin's grasp—a vital part of his body *and* the evidence of his earlier embarrassment—Xue Xian folded.

He grudgingly clicked his tongue. "Fine, fine, you're the best!"

"Who cleaned up the mess?" Xuanmin asked calmly.

Xue Xian rolled his eyes. "You—you cleaned it up, okay?" he forced out. "Enough already! Let go!"

Xuanmin bent down and released the unruly tail tip, placing it gently on the ground.

Spending much more time with this bald donkey will shorten my lifespan, Xue Xian thought.

Chapter 18:
The Inn's Attendant

THE UNNECESSARY STANDOFF between Xue Xian and Xuanmin caused some delay. Xue Xian hid behind the cliff to return to human form and dress, using the overhang as cover. By the time the two returned to the carriage, the caravan had just finished descending the mountain. They were almost to the county town ahead.

The sky outside grew darker. Evening was approaching. Shitou Zhang peered out through the curtains.

"It's almost nightfall. How much longer until we reach the city?" The journey had been nerve-racking, but they'd suffered no real misfortune. However, he was eager to get off this ghost carriage regardless. The sooner they entered the city, the sooner they could part ways.

"Shouldn't be long now." Jiang Shining pointed to the snow-covered ground outside. "Since we merged to this road, you can see the number of wheel tracks have multiplied. We must be close to the city gates."

Shitou Zhang glanced longingly at the bundle of dry rations, swallowing hard. He clutched his growling stomach and asked with a pained expression, "Can we rest a bit once we enter the city? Get some food or something? I'm so hungry I'm about to faint."

The moment he finished speaking, Lu Nianqi's stomach also growled.

"You hungry too?" Jiang Shining asked.

Lu Nianqi seemed embarrassed by his stomach's betrayal and lowered his eyes. He was still a teenager at heart.

"Wasn't me," he retorted. His tone was cold and stubborn, but the tips of his ears turned red.

Xue Xian stretched his stiff shoulders and back. "The snow won't stop anytime soon. Judging by the sky earlier, it might get heavier tonight. The carriages won't move that fast anyway, so whether we arrive a bit earlier or later won't make much difference."

Since the most difficult person to please had spoken, it was as good as agreed upon. Jiang Shining and the others glanced at the other difficult member of their party, Xuanmin, who showed no inclination to say anything. That was pretty much tacit agreement.

About half an hour later, the caravan slowed down, and the sound of scattered voices could be heard. Shitou Zhang rubbed his hands like a plump, round-headed fly on a piece of old fruit. "We're here!"

The county town they were passing through bore the name of Huazhi County. Located by the river and closest to Guanyin Crossing, it was a bustling town despite being on the border of Anqing Prefecture. However, it was tiny; it would take no more than an hour to walk around the entire town.

Even so, there were rules for entering and exiting the city gates. Xue Xian had once stayed here. If he remembered correctly, Huazhi County was very strict about checking people entering the city. Having to dismount and open the carriage doors was only the beginning. All outsiders had to register their names upon entering and leaving the city gates, no matter if they were passing through or staying for a few days.

Sure enough, after a few brief questions, the caravan stopped at the city gate. A guard holding a register was checking each carriage one by one.

When he knocked on the door of Xue Xian's carriage and peered inside to count and register, everyone's expressions soured. The guard had a thick layer of black medicinal paste smeared over half his face and on the back of his hand. It emitted an indescribable odor.

Perhaps the pungent paste left the guard uncomfortable too, for he rushed through the inspection. He only gave Xuanmin a few extra glances before closing the carriage door and waving them through.

"Why was he staring at the master earlier?" Jiang Shining asked, puzzled.

"Who knows? Maybe he doesn't look like a good person," Xue Xian flippantly replied, without turning around. He seemed fixated on the scene outside the carriage.

The others were stumped. Xuanmin was the most trustworthy-looking person in this carriage. How could the wise one say that?

The scar-faced man and his group were kind enough to take Xue Xian and the others all the way to an inn before parting ways. The opera troupe seemed to be in a hurry. They were unwilling to entertain a moment's delay, so they had no plans to stay inside the county.

Before leaving, the scar-faced man advised them: "If you need to rent a carriage, just ask the innkeeper. Huazhi County is small. If a beam falls and kills five people, three of them are probably related. The innkeeper has ways to find you a carriage. Just give him some money for his trouble."

Of course, Xue Xian and the others didn't want to take the opera troupe's carriage ride for granted. However, everyone in the troupe was an eccentric. They refused to accept money; they insisted that they didn't charge for performances during the last few days of the eleventh month, so why should they charge for carriage fees? Jiang Shining, the only one with some social graces, tried to push the money onto them for a long time. In the end, he failed and was left feeling quite helpless.

Finally, Lu Nianqi spoke up. "Stop dragging this out. We'll repay them someday."

As he said this, he touched his wooden twigs, his expression inscrutable.

"Did you…divine something?"

Lu Nianqi didn't give a direct answer. "We won't owe them, in any case."

A dragon like Xue Xian wouldn't doubt their little fortune teller's words, let alone a mouse like Jiang Shining. The opera troupe bade them farewell and hurried off toward the city gates, then quickly disappeared into the night.

Even after they'd booked themselves some rooms on the inn's first floor and were preparing to order some food and wine to warm up, Xue Xian's attention was still fixed on the street outside.

"What have you been looking at all this time?" Jiang Shining asked curiously.

"Lots of things. I've been to this county before. It isn't as lively as it used to be. There are fewer people. And…have you seen the wanted posters

posted by every household?" Xue Xian said.

"What posters? Let me see." Shitou Zhang, always restless, dashed out of the inn.

A short while later, he returned with something clutched under his robe. He shuffled to their table in a secluded corner of the dining hall. It was partially blocked by a red pillar, so others couldn't see many of their movements.

"I'm not sure if we're allowed to remove these posters, but I found one that had just fallen off the wall," Shitou Zhang said. He pulled out a piece of paper and spread it over the table. "Look!"

There hadn't been enough light outside to see what was on the wanted poster earlier. Now that it was laid out, everyone at the table was stunned. As a group, they turned to stare at Xuanmin.

"Master, th-this…" Shitou Zhang stammered. "Why are you on an official wanted poster? What… What did you do?"

Xuanmin examined the portrait on the poster with a serious expression.

"Back in Ningyang, Scribe Liu mistook the master for someone on a wanted poster, didn't he? But wasn't that dismissed?" Jiang Shining asked.

Xue Xian placed his hand on the paper. "I took a close look at the wanted poster in Ningyang. Besides both being monks and having a mole on their necks, the person in the portrait didn't look anything like this bald donkey. Plus, the person in that portrait seemed a lot older."

This one was another story.

“That batch of wanted posters was up for almost a month, right?” Xue Xian flicked it idly. “This one feels like it was posted just recently.”

The portrait here had been tweaked a bit from the one in Ningyang: The person looked younger, and their facial features had been adjusted. It now looked about 60 percent like Xuanmin. However, the document was rather strange. Under the portrait, there was just a brief description of the person’s features and age—nothing else. It didn’t say what the person had done or why they were being sought, just vaguely mentioned that the person was dangerous and should be reported to the authorities if seen but not to act rashly.

Jiang Shining and the others exchanged astonished glances, then looked back at the portrait.

“The eyes are smaller than the master’s,” Shitou Zhang finally managed to say after a long pause. He tried to find other differences. After a while, he pointed to the corner of the eyebrow on the portrait. “Look closely, there’s a small mole here. Master doesn’t have one. Also, the nose bridge is slightly flatter than his.”

Xue Xian glanced at the so-called mole at the corner of the eyebrow. Honestly, it might have been the result of the artist’s shaky hand.

Jiang Shining pointed to the text below the portrait. “Don’t just focus on the drawing. Look here. It emphasizes that this monk has high cheekbones and a slightly hooked nose.”

At that, four pairs of eyes fixed upon Xuanmin’s cheekbones and nose. He was unaccustomed to such blatant scrutiny and frowned a little. His cold expression made him look even more unapproachable.

Jiang Shining and the others awkwardly averted their gazes, but Xue Xian wasn't afraid of Xuanmin at all. He reached out and turned Xuanmin's face sideways to get a better look at his profile.

"His nose isn't hooked at all."

Still frowning at the portrait, Xuanmin brushed away Xue Xian's audacious hand.

Since he was on the bottom rung of the group's hierarchy, Shitou Zhang always seized a chance to flatter. "All that aside, just check out the master's expression. He doesn't seem like he's the person they're searching for. If he'd really done something, would he look so clueless? That would be some next-level acting! Even though the person in the portrait looks a little like the master, *this* guy looks way fiercer. His eyebrows aren't as righteous."

Shitou Zhang dragged out his words as he cautiously raised his finger, though he dared not point directly at Xuanmin's face. "Just look at him. How could *he* be some great evil?"

Xue Xian inwardly scoffed through Shitou Zhang's explanation. The bald donkey's clueless expression required no acting to pull off. With his tendency to forget things at the drop of a hat, he could easily lose track of what he had and hadn't done. He wouldn't have any idea why he was being hunted. However, it was true that the description of a hooked nose and high cheekbones didn't match. The drawing only showed a front view, so those features weren't apparent.

As Xue Xian pondered this, he overheard a low conversation from a nearby table. He discreetly looked over. His hearing was sharper than most, so he caught every word.

“That monk resembles the person on the wanted poster, doesn’t he?” one person whispered.

“I’ve been watching him since he came in, but he’s definitely not the one,” the other person replied in a low voice. “Our county is closest to the crossing, so we see a lot of passing monks every day. Just the day before yesterday, there was someone who looked almost exactly like the portrait, but the authorities dismissed him. The person they’re looking for has even higher cheekbones.”

The man subtly motioned at Xuanmin. “This guy’s cheekbones aren’t as high as yesterday’s suspect. No point in even considering it. Plus, any really suspicious monks would have been nabbed by the guards at the city gates. They wouldn’t have made it this far! My brother-in-law works in the yamen, and he mentioned yesterday that the higher-ups added more details to the description. The poster will be replaced with a new one in a couple of days.”

“Again?! They’ve changed it three times in half a month, and it’s still inaccurate? What kind of person swaps appearances like that?”

“Who knows!” The man shook his head. “Not long ago, everyone in the county would scrutinize every monk they went by. But after two changes, how many people still care?”

After seeing the wanted poster and hearing their conversation, Xue Xian understood why the guard at the city gate had given Xuanmin a few extra glances before letting them through. To someone who didn’t know Xuanmin, the differences between him and the portrait, as well as the details mentioned in the conversation, were enough to rule him out. His aura was ethereal and otherworldly, and most people were awestruck by his

presence before noticing his looks. Someone with such a bearing couldn't possibly be a great evil.

But Xue Xian was not like those strangers. He knew another side of Xuanmin—his unfathomable sorcery and his incomplete memory.

When someone only vaguely resembled a wanted poster and differed in many respects, people would assume they weren't the same person. On the other hand, if that someone not only resembled the portrait but also had an unknown origin, was profound and mysterious, revealed strange quirks, and had forgotten their past for some reason… Could all those things happening to one person be brushed off as mere coincidence?

Tsk. Is it really him?

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes, sipping his hot tea while staring at Xuanmin. However, Xuanmin was focused on the portrait and didn't notice his scrutiny.

"Guests, your food is here."

The inn's waiters were skillful; this one carried a wooden tray with four dishes in one hand, perfectly steady, spilling not even a drop of soup.

However, the waiter delivering their food was different from the one who'd served them tea and taken their order earlier. There was an unwritten rule in most inns: The waiter who first attended to a table would continue to serve them, as they might receive a few extra coins for good service.

"Huh? Where's the guy from earlier?" Shitou Zhang, ever the chatterbox, couldn't help asking the new waiter.

He smiled. "Oh, Qijin burned his hand while carrying a pot in the kitchen. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to serve you properly, so he

asked me to take over. This steamed pork is fresh from the pot, so be careful. It's hot. Enjoy your meal."

The waiter bowed and retreated, still smiling.

The group didn't dwell on it. After they'd been hungry all day, the aroma of the hot food was irresistible. Their suppressed appetites were now fully awakened, and no one had the presence of mind to worry about anything else.

Having been tricked by Xuanmin once, Xue Xian had ordered the dishes this time. The steamed pork was tender and fragrant; the claypot chicken soup rich and flavorful; the stir-fried mountain yam translucent and neatly arranged; and the mushroom tofu soup was still bubbling hot when served. There were also golden-bottomed beef buns that burst with hot soup at the first bite.

Shitou Zhang had been about to starve to death, but now he felt like he was in heaven. Even Lu Nianqi had to swallow his drool.

The ghost Jiang Shining sat sulking in the darkest corner, unable to eat a single bite. As he resentfully watched the steaming food, he took a shot at Xue Xian.

"How do you always know the signature dishes everywhere?"

"Stop looking like you're at a funeral," Xue Xian said, tilting his chin. "Enjoy the smell."

Back when his legs were in working order, Xue Xian hadn't cared much for hanging around on busy streets, but he still knew the eateries and taverns in different places well. If he had business to attend to, he could travel from south to north and east to west in a few leaps. Though he rushed

to get to his tasks, he never hurried to get back. Instead, he'd stop at different counties to savor lesser-known delicacies along the way.

Even after becoming partially paralyzed six months ago, he hadn't deprived himself. He always found ways to have people bring him famous signature dishes. But ever since meeting Xuanmin, he had been forced to go two or three days without a proper meal. Who was he supposed to complain to for this treatment?!

He twitched at the thought and started eating with more gusto, as if trying to make up for each missed meal.

Xuanmin had been preoccupied with the notice, but he found it hard to concentrate with Xue Xian's vigorous movements. He folded the paper and put it away.

The inn was quite generous with their portions. The steamed pork came piled high in a large bowl, and from the looks of it, they'd been served an entire pot of mushroom soup. Xuanmin glanced at the collection of dishes. Eating all of this, he thought, would be enough to knock out several people. He himself ate very little. He slowly savored a small bowl of tofu soup; it was a stark contrast to Xue Xian beside him.

Once Xuanmin finished the bowl, he set down his spoon.

"Is that all you're eating? Just a few bites? Are you really full?" Xue Xian prodded.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian's side of the table, which was heaped with a foothill of chicken and pork bones. He was trying to be sneaky. He probably felt self-conscious about the number of bones on his side, so he'd used the other end of his chopsticks to push half of them toward Xuanmin,

pretending there were two piles. But had anyone ever seen a monk spit out chicken and pork bones?

Shitou Zhang and the others watched Xue Xian finish sucking the meat off a chicken bone. While Xuanmin wasn't looking, he placed it on the pile closer to Xuanmin.

When Xuanmin glanced back, he found that the size of his pile had far surpassed Xue Xian's. As if anyone was stupid enough to believe that.

Jiang Shining cupped his hands in Xue Xian's direction. "Amazing."

Xue Xian ignored him.

No matter how hungry they were, the rest of their group had normal appetites. As Xuanmin had predicted, they were stuffed after eating half the dishes. Only Xue Xian kept going. His dining etiquette wasn't too bad; he didn't seem gluttonous at all as he worked through the food. With his looks, it was almost a pleasant sight. But…

The wise one really ate a *lot*!

Not only did he polish off the table's worth of food, but he also ordered another claypot chicken and ate it all by himself. Xuanmin frowned as he watched Xue Xian finish the last bite.

"Can you even sit up after this?" Xuanmin asked. The suggestion: *Aren't you eating too much?*

"It's not like I'm the one walking around. You should worry more about whether your arms are strong enough," Xue Xian said. He had been carried in and out of carriages so many times that he was beyond caring at this point. "Besides, this is no more than a taster for me. Honestly, I could swallow ten of you in one go. I'm holding back, understand?"

As he spoke, he drew an imaginary cage the size of Xuanmin's head, and his oily fingers brushed over Xuanmin's face several times.

Xuanmin expressionlessly picked up a hot towel from the table, wrapped it around Xue Xian's hand, and pressed it onto the table. "Wipe your hands before doing anything."

"You're so *fussy*," Xue Xian grumbled.

The snow was sure to continue through the night, so their rented carriage wouldn't arrive until the next morning. They had booked a few rooms at the inn and planned to rest there for the night, then set off for Qingping County at dawn. Their first stop would be to find Jiang Shining's eldest sister to perform rites for their parents. Next, they would follow Lu Nianqi's divination to find the person who had tied up Shitou Zhang.

While they headed upstairs, Xue Xian peered over the room below and spotted someone standing in a corner near the staircase that led to the kitchen. The man's bandaged fingers caught Xue Xian's attention, and he remembered the waiter who had first greeted them. What was his name again?

Right, it was Qijin—likely a nickname based on his birth weight, a common practice to ensure the child's survival.

The waiter's eyes met Xue Xian's. He hesitated, nodded awkwardly, then turned and disappeared into the kitchen. Xue Xian paid little mind to the interaction. His thoughts were preoccupied with other matters.

Due to his mobility issues, it would be troublesome if he needed to get up during the night, so Xuanmin had agreed to share a room with him to keep an eye on him. This arrangement suited Xue Xian just fine, as he

wanted to question Xuanmin about his memory loss and figure out whether the person the authorities were after was indeed Xuanmin.

While they were settling into their rooms upstairs, in a corner of the kitchen the waiter Qijin was rubbing his burned fingers and speaking to a darker-skinned waiter who had taken over his shift.

"Are you sure?" the darker-skinned waiter asked in a hushed voice.

"I only saw him once… And you know how it is—every time the state preceptor performs the sacrificial rites, he wears a mask. You can't see his face, only his eyes. I was standing close to the road, someone pushed me, and I almost stumbled into the procession. The state preceptor… When he glanced at me, I was so scared I couldn't move. How can I put it?" He waved his hands around uncertainly. "Those eyes… Once they look at you, you'll never forget them. I broke out in a cold sweat. When that guest glanced at me just now, I felt the same way. My legs went weak."

"But…" The darker-skinned waiter still seemed skeptical.

"Listen, even though I've never seen the state preceptor's face, I've seen him from the back. That scene, that figure—I'll never forget it. The way that guest walks, his posture, it's exactly the same as what I saw!"

"It doesn't make sense. Why would the state preceptor come to a place like this? Besides, isn't it said that he's in seclusion?"

"You know, with those wanted posters plastered all over the streets lately, looking for a monk who somewhat resembles that guest… Could it be…?"

The darker-skinned waiter frowned, thinking for a long moment. "Forget it. Maybe after the inn closes, we should make a trip to the county

office.”

Xuanmin was as fastidious as ever. He couldn’t stand anything dirty or messy, so he had booked only the best rooms. Although he had a fair amount of silver on him, it wouldn’t last long at this rate. Xue Xian couldn’t help wondering how much money Xuanmin had left and what he planned to do once it ran out. Even though he was skilled, it was hard to imagine him actively asking people for money.

The best rooms in this inn weren’t on par with those at Guiyun Hall, but they were clean and tidy. The attendant serving them was quick and efficient, tidying up the room and bringing fresh tea and a copper basin for washing their hands.

“I’ll be upstairs if you need anything. Just call and I’ll come,” the attendant said before closing the door behind him.

Although they were supposed to rest for the night, the only ones who truly needed the rest were Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang. Sleeping was optional for Xue Xian. As for Xuanmin… Well, Xue Xian had pretty much stopped thinking of him as human. He barely ate or rested—how could he be considered human?

The black dragon had been jostled around in a carriage all day. Since his paralyzed legs lacked feeling, he had to use his lower back to keep himself upright. After a while, it became quite uncomfortable. To help him relax and ease the strain, Xuanmin had settled Xue Xian onto the bed as soon as they entered the room. The bed in the inn’s best room was surprisingly comfortable, with thick, soft bedding that didn’t irritate the skin. It was certainly better than a hard bench. Xue Xian found Xuanmin’s gesture quite considerate. He stretched lazily, loosening his shoulders and

back, then burrowed into the blankets, propped himself up on the piled bedding, and uttered a contented sigh.

Xuanmin, on the other hand, sat by the carved wooden table, fully dressed and showing no intention of resting. He adjusted the wick of the oil lamp to brighten the light, then pulled the folded poster from his robe, spreading it out on the table and examining it under the lamp. The warm yellow light cast shadows under his brow, accentuating his deep-set eyes, high nose bridge, and the cold, unyielding lines of his mouth.

Xue Xian propped his head up, watching Xuanmin with a half-lidded gaze. After a while, he spoke.

“Bald donkey?”

Xuanmin waited for some follow-up. When none came, he responded without looking up. “Hmm?”

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow. “Is the person on the poster you or not?”

The question was blunt, but it was typical of Xue Xian’s straightforward and unfiltered nature. Xue Xian watched Xuanmin smooth the wanted poster down on the table, his fingertips touching one corner. He turned to Xue Xian, as if weighing how to respond—or perhaps deciding not to.

It hadn’t been long since Xuanmin had picked Xue Xian up at the Jiang family clinic, but the events that had unfolded since made it feel like much more time had passed. Sometimes, Xue Xian felt as if they had known each other for a long time. Long enough to grow familiar.

Xue Xian could tell that Xuanmin was a deeply guarded person. Despite their days of close proximity, Xuanmin had hardly spoken about himself. This could have been due to his innate temperament or a result of his memory loss. Xue Xian could relate; if he had lost that many memories, he might also shut everyone out and trust no one. He might even stir up some chaos in an attempt to recover what he'd lost, and anyone who stood in his way would be in for a world of trouble.

Their current situation was still unusual. After all, they were traveling together, two passengers on the same boat. If Xuanmin had nothing to do with the person on the notice, they would have a way of handling that. But if he *was* involved, they would need a different approach. They had to be prepared; they couldn't wait until trouble came knocking to start digging a hole.

"Bald donkey, how about this. Let's make a fair deal, all right?" Xue Xian said with a serious expression.

Not likely. This evil spirit didn't seem like someone who understood fairness. Xuanmin continued to examine the parchment in front of him. Yet he voiced no objections—if Xue Xian really wanted to stir up trouble, asking for his opinion was merely a formality. Objections would make no difference.

Presented with Xuanmin's attitude that screamed *I'll reluctantly listen to what you have to say*, Xue Xian continued. "We don't really know each other well, so if we run into trouble, it'll be hard to deal with—"

Xuanmin finally looked at Xue Xian, surprised to hear him speak so sensibly for once.

“Let’s ask each other some important questions,” Xue Xian said. “If I ask you something and you can answer, then I’ll answer one of your questions in return. If you can’t answer or don’t want to, you give me a silver coin. How about that?”

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes, seeming to think he was the epitome of reason.

Xuanmin was left momentarily speechless. What a clever deal, playing this game with someone who was clearly suffering from memory loss. *If you can’t answer, you have to give me money.* This wasn’t about getting to the bottom of things; it was a ploy to extort Xuanmin.

“You might as well just take it,” Xuanmin said flatly, reaching into his hidden pouch and pulling out all the silver pieces he had. He tossed them onto the bed with a flick of his wrist.

Xue Xian caught them with a quick motion, weighing them in his hand. “All right, fine, I won’t mess with you. Let’s try a different approach.”

The venerable monk truly lived up to his reputation, treating money as if it were dirt. Having tossed away all his silver, Xuanmin no longer paid Xue Xian any mind. He returned his attention to his notice.

Xue Xian rapped the bed. “Hey, look at me. This is serious.”

Xuanmin didn’t look up, as if he found Xue Xian’s sprawled-out posture offensive. “Speak.”

“I’ll be generous, okay? I’ll ask you questions, and if you give me some answers, I’ll give you a gold piece. If you don’t, we’ll set it aside until you remember. Of course, if there’s something you don’t want to answer, you can always say you don’t remember.”

As Xue Xian spoke, he piled the silver pieces Xuanmin had given him on one side of the bedding, as if placing a bet in a gambling den. “See, your money is still yours. I won’t take a single piece. You have nothing to lose, and you might even earn something. How about that?”

In truth, Xuanmin had been footing the bill for their entire journey, spending quite a bit along the way. Xue Xian had never liked owing people anything, whether it was favors or money. He always repaid silver with gold. But he had a peculiar habit—he didn’t like to repay them directly, preferring these roundabout methods. It was a bit of a sickness.

Xuanmin raised his head again, surprised that this wise one was willing to take a loss. Had the sun risen from the west?

"If you don't object, I'll take that as agreement," Xue Xian said, then paused to think: Where should he start?

He knew Xuanmin's personality well. The monk didn't care much about money, so he wouldn't force himself to answer questions he didn't want to just to win a few coins. Although Xue Xian hadn't started asking his questions yet, he already had a hunch: Xuanmin wouldn't say much. But any information was better than none.

After some thought, Xue Xian began: "When did you start having issues with not recognizing people when you wake up?"

Xuanmin frowned slightly, staring at the candle flame, and didn't answer.

Great. Off to a bad start.

Just as Xue Xian thought he wouldn't get an answer to the first question, Xuanmin spoke in a low voice.

"I don't remember. I've been like this since I woke up a few months ago. When it happened, I usually needed a couple of days to recover. Now it's faster."

Xue Xian was taken aback. *Huh? He actually answered sincerely?*

Xuanmin frowned and reached up to touch the side of his neck. "Last time, you told me to touch this place. Why?"

"You haven't seen it?"

Then, Xue Xian remembered that every time Xuanmin returned to normal, the mole on his neck also returned to its usual state. It was possible

he really had never seen the change.

"Every time you forget people, the mole on your neck sprouts a few blood vessels, like a spider. When you touch it, the blood vessels retract, and you stop being an idiot."

Xuanmin fell silent. Seeing his furrowed brow, Xue Xian surmised that he was truly ignorant of the mole's peculiar behavior.

"All right, that counts as answering one question." Xue Xian dug into his sleeve with some difficulty and pulled out a handful of gold beads the size of peanuts. He tossed one into Xuanmin's pile of silver.

"Where do you keep all these gold beads?"

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow. "I am a divine being, after all. There are plenty of places on my body to hide things. It's just a nuisance to retrieve them in public, so I've been using your pockets." He moved on to his next question right away. "You said you woke up like this a few months ago… What does that mean?"

This time, Xuanmin didn't remain silent for long. He answered quite directly, "Exactly what it sounds like. When I woke up, I was alone in a corpse shop in the mountains of Langzhou."

"A *corpse shop*?" Xue Xian was startled. "How did you even end up there?"

Corpse shops were places in the Xiangxi region where corpse drivers could rest and take shelter from the weather during their journeys. Living people avoided such places due to the bad luck associated with them.

Xuanmin shook his head. "I have no memory of anything before that. When I woke up, all I had was a string of copper coins, a handwritten book

on geomancy and arrays, a thin piece of paper with some scattered notes, and some yellow talismans."

"You don't remember what you did before, where you came from, where you were going, or what you were supposed to do?" Xue Xian felt a pang of pity for the bald donkey. Any ordinary person waking up in a remote corpse shop, knowing nothing about their past or future, would likely go mad.

"No, I knew nothing at the time. I recalled some fragments later, but I'd often forget them again by the next day."

"What did you do after that?"

"Whenever I remembered something, I'd jot it down on that piece of paper and carry it with me. When my mind wasn't clear, I'd take a look at it."

"Oh. Was that the paper you had Lu Shijiu help you divine in the underground tomb on Grave Island? You didn't recognize your own handwriting?"

"There were already some words written on it. Handwriting can be forged," Xuanmin said calmly.

"So, you were worried someone might have imitated your handwriting and written misleading things?"

"Mm."

"What *did* you write?" Xue Xian asked, tossing two more gold beads into Xuanmin's pile of silver.

"A mixture of things. Some about that string of copper coins, the names of a few locations, and…one more thing."

“What thing?”

“‘*Find them,*’” Xuanmin said. “I’m supposed to find someone. I owe that person something, and until I repay it, I won’t feel at peace.”

His voice was low and steady, carrying a weight that seemed to fill the room. Though his tone was as cold as ever, there was an undeniable heaviness to his words—a sadness that even an outsider could sense.

This was the first time Xue Xian had sensed such a strong emotion from Xuanmin, and it made the monk seem more human. For some reason, Xue Xian felt a tightness in his chest, a discomfort that he couldn’t quite place. He regarded Xuanmin for a minute.

“Okay. I don’t have any more questions. You can keep the money.” With that, he gathered the remaining gold beads and stuffed them back into his sleeve, which seemed to have some hidden mechanism.

In truth, he still hadn’t gotten any real answers. He still didn’t know if Xuanmin was the person on the notice, but he no longer felt like asking.

He noticed Xuanmin’s slight pause, as if the monk also found his sudden coldness puzzling.

Just as Xuanmin stood up and began to walk toward the bed, Xue Xian faintly heard voices outside the window, along with the soft clinking of metal—likely the sound of soldiers’ armor. With the curfew in effect, the only people who could be out on the streets at night carrying weapons were…the county’s officers?

Chapter 19:
On Clouds and Dragons

THE TWO INN ATTENDANTS led the officers from the local government to the base of the inn's wall. With some restraint, they pointed to a closed window on the second floor and whispered, "Sir, it's this room."

These two were used to serving people every day, so they had quite the silver tongues. As mere commoners, they didn't fully grasp the deeper implications of the wanted poster, so they had to be extra cautious with their words. They couldn't blurt out something like *There's a monk in our inn who looks exactly like the state preceptor from the back!* If they were wrong, they would offend three parties at once. They might as well gouge out their eyeballs and wash them clean if that happened.

But they also couldn't say *There's a monk in our inn who looks a lot like the one wanted across the land!* What if, by some remote chance, this monk really was the state preceptor or someone connected to him? Associating a renowned figure with a wanted person would only invite trouble.

After much deliberation, the two attendants settled on a neutral statement when they went to the government office: "A monk has arrived at our inn, and he seems rather unusual." How the officers interpreted "unusual" wasn't their concern.

Even so, when leading the officers to the base of the wall, the attendants felt their nerves pulled taut. For reasons they couldn't name, they were unable to calm themselves.

Although the voices at the base of the wall were hushed, Xue Xian, curled up in his bedding, heard every word clearly. They were surrounded again. Surrounded again by…county officers!

The bald donkey must have been cursed with bad luck. Of the three towns he had stayed in, he had managed to attract the attention of the authorities in two, and each time they had come right to his door.

Not to mention, Xue Xian's inexplicable overheating from earlier hadn't dissipated. He rolled over, turning the back of his head toward Xuanmin. It was a typical cycle: "Three days of minor irritation leads to five days of major irritation."

Xuanmin's footsteps were always silent, but to Xue Xian, his presence was anything but subtle. He could sense that Xuanmin had approached the bed and was standing there, looking down at him.

Given Xuanmin's stoic and indifferent nature, Xue Xian assumed he'd come over to do one thing and one thing only: collect the money Xue Xian had told him to take away. To Xue Xian's surprise, Xuanmin didn't move. His hands didn't touch the bedding or reach for the money. Instead, he just stayed beside the bed.

What was the point of standing there like a pole without saying a word?

Xue Xian scowled a little. He wasn't used to being stared at by someone motionless and silent like this. If it were anyone else, he could dismiss them as easily as a speck of dust or shove them away with one hand. But Xuanmin was different. When ordinary people stared at Xue Xian, he only felt annoyed. When Xuanmin studied him like this, the back

of his head, neck, and shoulders grew tense. His scales were practically stretched taut.

Are you done yet? If you have something to say, you accursed monk, just say it!

Xue Xian tensed up in his nest of bedding as he grumbled to himself, but he didn't make a sound.

The room was eerily quiet.

For a moment, all the noises from next door, outside the window, and even a street away vanished despite Xue Xian's extraordinary hearing. He was waiting for Xuanmin to speak. After all, standing there for so long without moving must have meant he had something to say—something unusual. There was no reason for ordinary words to be held back for so long. Was he going to explain who he was looking for? Something else?

The officers outside the window were preparing to come upstairs, but Xuanmin still hadn't spoken.

Xue Xian's mind raced. *How haven't you suffocated yourself yet?*

The officers' hushed voices faintly reached Xue Xian's ears: "Watch your step. Don't make any noise and alert them. We'll enter through the front door, and you guard the window. Let's go!"

If you keep up your suffocation act, you'll end up in one of the county's prison cells, Xue Xian sneered in his head.

"You—"

Xuanmin's low voice had ground out at last, and it carried an indescribable tone that made the skin on the back of Xue Xian's head tighten.

You're a mighty dragon, but just one word from someone makes you tense? What kind of reaction is that?!

Xue Xian held his breath, waiting for Xuanmin to continue. But the blasted bald donkey fell silent again after uttering one word.

It was a good thing that this wise one was a human and not a dragon. Otherwise the feeling of being left hanging would have driven him to tear the house down.

The officers had entered the inn through the back door, but it seemed they had been spotted. Some commotion ensued.

Xue Xian heard the rustle of Xuanmin's robes as he turned his head toward the door, and that odd atmosphere from before vanished at the disruption.

Inexplicably furious, Xue Xian buried his head in the nest of bedding like he wished he could suffocate and be done with it.

I don't care if you live or die. If they catch you, so be it. I have my ways to escape.

But a white light had already begun to emanate from his body.

Thud, thud, thud.

Now that they were upstairs, the officers no longer bothered to hide their movements. Their footsteps were hurried and heavy, enough to send anyone's heart pumping. Outside the window, a group of officers drew their sabers with a sharp screech of metal. Both the door and the window were about to be blocked off.

The officers who had reached the top of the stairs made even more noise as they approached the door, shouting at the attendants waiting

nearby.

In that split second, the figure curled up on the bed vanished. A long black shadow emerged from the bedding, rapidly elongating and growing as it rose into the air.

Boom!

The wall next to the bed collapsed, revealing the stunned faces of Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi in the neighboring room.

It seemed Xuanmin hadn't expected Xue Xian to transform into a dragon without any hesitation, for he was momentarily stunned. By the time he regained his composure, he found himself holding a black robe—clearly thrown at him by the dragon, who was treating him like a mere servant tasked with carrying his clothes. More absurdly, after tossing the robe to Xuanmin, Xue Xian also scooped up the gold and silver pieces from the bed with one claw. The treasures rolled around in his claws for a moment before disappearing beneath his scales, hidden who knew where.

The officers outside couldn't possibly miss the commotion of a wall being blown apart. An explosive shout rang out: "Don't waste your energy! You're surrounded on all sides. There's no way you can escape!"

As they shouted, the officers slammed the door open with a loud bang.

"It's futile," their leader sneered. "If you have the ability, why don't you just lift the roof and fly away—"

His taunting abruptly cut off.

The officers crowding outside the door thought they were dreaming.

No, they must have been.

The leader's mouth hung open as he stared, dumbfounded, at the enormous black dragon coiled inside the room. The creature was terrifyingly large; its tail alone filled the entire room. The bed was crushed under its weight, and one whole wall of the room had collapsed. The edges of the break were as clean as if cut by a sharp blade, but what kind of blade could cut through a wall as if it were tofu?

The leader watched as the dragon lifted the roof of the room. Its massive body stretched outside and coiled over the sloping eaves, which creaked ominously under its weight.

While the officers stood frozen, their faces pale with shock, the dragon lowered its head and swept its half-lidded eyes over them. Then, with a swift motion of its claws, it grabbed a short middle-aged man and a thin young boy who had been dumbstruck in the other room. At the same time, it nudged a young monk in white robes onto its back with its head.

The dragon coolly scanned the crowd before it let out a clear, piercing cry. Its body surged forward.

In an instant, the wind and clouds churned. Faint flashes of lightning sparked within the thick mist. The overcast sky flickered with light and shadow as the deep rumble of thunder grew louder and closer. A fierce wind that howled like a wild animal kicked up.

The dragon rode the wind and soared into the sky. Its long black form flickered in and out of view among the clouds, twisting and turning a few times before it disappeared completely.

Everyone—the officers outside the door, those waiting at the base of the wall, the inn attendants, the residents and shop owners on either side of the street, and anyone who happened to glance up at the sky at that moment

—witnessed the dragon's ascent into the clouds. They stood in stunned silence, unable to process what they had just seen.

The leader of the officers didn't even get a clear look at Xuanmin's face. He could only remember his snow-white monk's robes.

As the dragon disappeared with the rush of wind, the gathered clouds shifted, and a torrential downpour began. The rain was heavy and cold, striking their faces with an icy sting that sent shivers down their spines.

It was only then that the officers slowly began to regain their senses.

"Did… Did it really just lift the roof and fly away?" one of them muttered. His voice was barely audible, as if squeezed from the depths of his throat. Whether from fear or the cold, it was hard to tell.

The leader's lips trembled, and he turned to his men with a pale face. "W-we came to arrest that monk, right?"

"Yeah…" one of his dazed subordinates replied.

"And that thing that flew into the sky. That was a dragon, right?" the leader continued, as if in a dream.

"Yeah…"

"And the monk—did you see him?" The leader looked up at the clouds, his expression muddled. "The monk rode the dragon and flew away…"

"Yeah…"

They stood there like a mob of meerkats, their necks craned as they stared dumbly at the sky, unable to say anything beyond "Yeah." It was only when their clothes were thoroughly soaked by the cold rain a long moment later that they snapped back to reality.

A monk! Riding a *dragon*! Dragons were divine creatures, not something you'd see any day, and that monk had ridden the divine creature into the sky. How could that monk be an ordinary person?!

A thought flashed through their minds almost simultaneously. They looked at each other, their faces filled with fear.

One of them cautiously whispered, "Could it be… Could it be… *him*?"

A monk who could command a dragon—there was only one person in the entire nation they could think of: the mysterious, never-seen state preceptor.

Sometimes, rumors spread through the streets at an astonishing speed. In just one night, the entire town of Huazhi County was buzzing with one thing—the state preceptor had appeared!

The once inconspicuous inn became the center of attention. After being interrogated by the authorities, the two inn attendants were bombarded with questions from their neighbors.

However, while Huazhi County was in an uproar, the monk and the black dragon who were the subject of all the gossip were swimming ashore from a wild lake near Qingping County.

Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi had yet to recover from their aerial ordeal; they floated on the lake like corpses. Once they were fished out by Xuanmin, they lay on the shore in a stupor for a long time, unable to utter a word.

Jiang Shining had been forced back into paper form. Now, he clung to a dry reed by the shore, trembling in the wind. As he shivered, he

squinted at the distant pavilion.

"Wise One, could you please choose a less thrilling way to land next time?" Jiang Shining called out.

"We landed, didn't we? And we saved on travel expenses." Xue Xian pointed nonchalantly at the distant city gate. "Look at that city gate. Do you recognize the characters on it? Come on, read with me: *Qing—Ping—County*. I've brought you right to your elder sister's doorstep, and you're still complaining? Have you no shame? Huh?"

Even his escape had to be a huge, flashy show with thunder and rolling clouds, like anything less wouldn't do himself justice. But his lower body remained quite hampered, and his tail difficult to control.

"All the way here, I had to rely on the raging wind I summoned to either push or carry me. It was the only way to control our direction." Xue Xian was sopping wet as he leaned against the tree and tapped his leg. "You don't need a brain to know that things would be a bit unstable. It should be obvious, shouldn't it?"

Things, however, had not been just "a bit" unstable—they had been *extremely* unstable. Downright perilous, even.

The whole journey, Shitou Zhang had been praying hard that Xue Xian's claws would hold tight. He even wished he had eight legs like an octopus so he could cling firmly to the dragon's claws. Every time Xue Xian rolled in the clouds or soared higher, Shitou Zhang was both exhilarated, like he'd ascended to heaven, and scared out of his mind, left screaming like a banshee. The thrill was so intense that he felt like his soul had fled his body.

Meanwhile, Jiang Shining had felt somewhat relieved during their flight through the sky. He *knew* it was wise to have turned back into paper and slipped into Lu Nianqi's inner pocket. Paper was light, and the pocket was hidden inside his clothes, so there was no risk of falling. At least he wouldn't end up as disheveled as Shitou Zhang and humiliate himself.

His relief hadn't lasted long. Xue Xian was going too fast, and when they landed, the wind alone wasn't enough to slow them down. Unable to control his tail or think of a better solution in the moment, he chose a lake near the city that looked deep and wide enough to serve as a landing spot.

A massive black dragon splashing straight down could easily have emptied half the lake and shattered an entire stretch of the city wall. But Xue Xian had been clever. Realizing he couldn't stop in time, he tossed everyone aside in midair and transformed back into human form. He even remembered to snatch his clothes from Xuanmin in the process.

With a series of loud splashes, everyone had plopped into the water, one after another.

As soon as Xue Xian hit the water, Xuanmin had grabbed him by the waist and pulled him toward the shore. Though it could be said that the two swam ashore together, Xue Xian was only going through the motions with his arms. In reality, Xuanmin carried Xue Xian to dry land.

Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi had only been slapped hard by the water, but Jiang Shining almost disintegrated. After all, he was made of paper, not metal. Just how many indignities had he suffered up to this point?

When Xuanmin fished Jiang Shining out and hung him on a withered reed to dry, he felt like he'd survived a natural disaster. He didn't dare move

his limbs, afraid that the slightest movement would cause his arms and legs to fall off.

"Wh-what were you thinking, Wise One, to throw us down from such a height?" Jiang Shining asked. He was still shaking with terror.

Xue Xian leaned his elbow on a nearby rock. "Eh. Spur-of-the-moment decision."

Jiang Shining felt like vomiting blood.

Xue Xian leaned against a tree. He had hastily draped his black clothes over himself, but they were half slipping off his frame, giving him a somewhat rakish and untamed appearance.

Xuanmin, unable to stand the feeling of being soaked, drew a talisman on his hand. Instantly, his robes were a dry, pristine white, free from the smallest speck of dust. Treading through the wet grass, he bent down and smeared a streak of blood from his still-bleeding finger onto the foreheads of Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang, then touched Jiang Shining's trembling paper form.

The faint streaks of blood quickly faded.

"I feel…like I'm being roasted by a fire?" Jiang Shining said cautiously.

"Cleansing spell," Xuanmin said. The reason he only smeared a streak and didn't draw the full talisman was that the moment it took effect, it would generate some heat, and he was afraid they wouldn't be able to withstand it.

Jiang Shining was only a thin sheet of paper and dried right away. He relaxed and slumped completely on the dry reed.

Xue Xian tugged at his collar. His soaked clothes clung to his skin, heavy and unpleasant. He was about to muster some body heat to dry his clothes when he saw Xuanmin walk over, having finished with the rest.

The white hemp of his monk's robes was considered inauspicious by the commonfolk, but it was indeed beautiful, like a wisp of white mist in the deep night. Its hem brushed over the dry grass and gravel, yet not a speck of dust clung to it.

Xuanmin stopped before the dragon and gazed downward. Xue Xian looked back from where he was lounging with an indifferent expression.

Waiting for the monk to speak in the inn had nearly driven Xue Xian mad. If he waited again with some undefined expectation, he might as well feed his brain to the fishes.

"Don't just stand in front of me," Xue Xian said, keeping his voice neutral.

Xuanmin was standing, while he was sitting down. If he didn't look up, he could only see Xuanmin's hands hanging by his sides.

Just as Xue Xian was about to look away, the hand in front of him moved.

Xuanmin didn't bend down. Instead, he used the curve of his finger to lift Xue Xian's slender chin, making him tilt his head back slightly. Then, with his still-bleeding finger, he drew a streak on Xue Xian's forehead.

Xue Xian was caught off guard and instinctively focused on Xuanmin's finger. He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but he felt like Xuanmin's bloodstained thumb had paused near his cheek. For a brief moment, he thought Xuanmin's finger was about to touch his face, but the

fingertip only hesitated briefly before moving up to draw a line on his forehead.

Xuanmin still wore his usual cold expression. His calm eyes were fixed on Xue Xian's forehead as if he were doing something utterly ordinary.

Xue Xian couldn't see what the blood streak on his forehead looked like, but he could feel his soaked, sticky clothes drying rapidly. He adjusted the fabric.

"Would it kill you to bend down?" he drawled.

Xuanmin lowered his hand and met Xue Xian's eyes. "Not going to turn the back of your head to me anymore?"

Xue Xian felt like smashing the boulder he was leaning on into the bald donkey's face. "I'll do as I please. None of your business. Get lost!"

In all the time Xuanmin could remember, he had rarely shown emotion and never bothered to delve into others' feelings. To him, Xue Xian's temperament—capable of flipping through moods like a book through pages, going from clingy one moment to dismissive the next—was like someone who'd never walked before trying to run on water. The leap was a bit too much.

Xue Xian shooed Xuanmin away by slapping the rock. The monk stood there for a second before he turned to leave. Xue Xian felt a surge of frustration. He wanted to spit on this idiot's face.

Jiang Shining had dried off. He slid down the withered reed and transformed back into human form. Once he turned around, he saw Xue Xian's dark expression.

“Why do you look like that?” Jiang Shining asked cautiously. “After all that effort, are you hungry again?”

Xue Xian made a low, gloomy sound in his throat. “My teeth are itching. I feel like eating someone.”

At that, Jiang Shining peeked at Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi.

Xuanmin hadn’t gone far. He gathered some dry branches and leaves, placed them between Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, and lit a fire to warm them. This would prevent the two from freezing while their clothes dried.

After starting the fire, Xuanmin walked back and stood beside Xue Xian, who scowled at him. “What now?”

Xuanmin untied the string of copper coins from his waist and swiped his finger over it. “Hold out your hand.”

Though skeptical, Xue Xian did as he was asked. Xuanmin set the string of coins in his open palm.

“Some magical tools, through extended use, accumulate spiritual energy. You can borrow their power for yourself.” Xuanmin cast his eyes over Xue Xian’s lifeless legs.

Xue Xian had heard of such things, but magical tools were usually used as mediums by ordinary people. He had no need for them and had never given them much thought. The so-called “copper coins with a glossy surface” referred to coins imbued with spiritual energy. These tools, refined with pure spiritual energy, were excellent aids—useful for everything from divination and geomancy to manipulating the five elements of heaven and earth, if one had the ability.

If they could do anything, then perhaps they could help regenerate bones and tendons.

Xue Xian, observing how Xuanmin glanced at his legs, understood his meaning. However, most people who owned these types of tools saw them as extensions of their own lives. They'd make a foe of anyone who'd dare touch them; to hand one over with a single curse was unthinkable.

Xue Xian studied the copper coins in his hand, unsure of what to say, his expression refusing to settle in one place.

"Did you drink rat poison or something?"

Xuanmin didn't have anything to say to something so ridiculous.

Either way, Xue Xian's disbelief persisted. He dangled the copper coins in front of Xuanmin's eyes, waving them once, then twice, giving the monk a chance to change his mind.

On the third try Xuanmin suppressed a sigh, then pressed Xue Xian's hand down. "There are seals on these coins, but they can still be of some use. I don't need them for now, so you can take them."

"Seals?" Xue Xian was startled before he understood. No wonder the coins looked dull and devoid of spiritual energy. "But who sealed them? You?"

Xuanmin shook his head. "I don't remember. There are five coins, each with a seal. Two of the seals have loosened as of late and might be broken soon."

Xue Xian bit his tongue and considered this.

When he'd been a paper doll or golden marble, he could rely on his small size to press against Xuanmin's waist to recover his strength. Since

returning to his original form, whether as a dragon or a human, it was no longer convenient to lean against Xuanmin. Just conjuring that image was enough to make Xue Xian's eyes burn—never mind actually doing it! The recovery of his spine had stagnated significantly in recent days. He could feel some improvements, but they were much slower than before. He didn't want to drag around his useless legs or be carried by others. It was far too humiliating.

Xue Xian lingered in thought until his hesitation evaporated. He would keep the coins. Placing them in his palm, he closed his eyes and focused on healing his spine.

The Cleansing Spell drawn with blood wasn't as effective as a whole talisman. It took some time for Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi's clothes to dry completely, and it took even longer for them to recover from their shock and confusion.

“Why aren’t you in a hurry at all?” Lu Nianqi asked Jiang Shining after recovering. He didn’t like the idea of holding the group back.

Jiang Shining sat down by the rock, quietly watching the city gate illuminated by lanterns in the distance. “We have to wait until dawn’s light anyway. What’s the rush? We’re already at the gate.”

The city gates were closed at night, and there was a curfew. No one could enter or leave without good reason. Even if they entered the city, it wouldn’t be appropriate to knock on someone’s door in the middle of the night. The night was already half over, so dawn wasn’t far away. They could wait.

“The last time I saw my elder sister was three years ago, when she returned to Ningyang after receiving the news,” Jiang Shining murmured. “After death, my memories became hazy, and it wasn’t until I received this paper body that they improved. But I remember she cried for a long time. She sobbed so much that I can still hear it now…”

When the gong rang at dawn and the city gates opened, the people inside would start their morning routines, and he would finally see his elder sister. He could see how she was doing and release his parents’ souls that had been sealed for so long.

In all his years of living, he’d rarely left home and had never experienced the nervousness of homecoming. Now, between this unfamiliar wild lake and the city gates of a town that was foreign to him, the thought that all his lingering attachments would soon be resolved and his final burdens lifted filled him with a sense of unease.

Clang!

After what felt like an eternity, the gong heralding the arrival of dawn rang out from within the city.

Chapter 20:
Plague County

ALL TIDIED UP, the group stood at the city gate. With a creak, the ancient gate was pulled open from the inside by the guards, revealing the city within, accompanied by a gust of wind carrying a strange odor.

Shitou Zhang choked on the cold wind and coughed several times. Frowning, he covered his nose with one hand and fanned the air in front of him with the other. “What is this smell? It smells like medicine, mixed with something else…like something musty.”

“That’s fresh medicinal brew mixed with some moldy herbal dregs,” Jiang Shining explained. He didn’t cover his nose, as these two smells were not unfamiliar to him. His family’s clinic had several small stoves in the back room where medicine brewed from dawn to dusk, filling the air with the scent of fresh medicine year-round. During the rainy season in April, the dregs dumped at the back door in the morning would emit a faint funk by evening.

But the Jiang family clinic had nothing on the size of Qingping County. There had to be at least a dozen households nearby brewing medicine and dumping the dregs for the smell to waft out as soon as the city gate opened.

That many people falling ill at the same time? They all had a bad feeling about it.

Jiang Shining’s expression shifted, and he pressed forward a few steps into the city. However, several city guards swiftly moved to cross their

long sabers and block his path.

“The city gates are closed for the time being. Please turn back,” one guard said stiffly.

“May I ask why that’s the case?” Jiang Shining asked, his voice tinged with urgency.

The guard remained cold and official: “No comment. Please turn back!”

However, the guard couldn’t help but dart his eyes toward Xuanmin.

Another guard, this one square-faced, frowned and pointed his saber at the figure Xuanmin was carrying.

“Why do you have a dead person? You trying to bring bad luck?” He reached out to push Xuanmin, wanting to shoo the group away from the gate and out of the way.

Snap!

Just as the square-faced guard was about to touch Xuanmin, Xue Xian lifted the black cloth covering his face and grabbed the guard’s wrist with his pale hand.

Turning his head, Xue Xian said in a low voice, “Speak properly. Why resort to violence?”

“Huh?” The guard was startled and tried to pull his hand back, but it didn’t budge. He hadn’t expected someone wrapped head to toe in black clothing to be alive. Caught off guard, he blushed and raised his voice.

“How dare you! What are you trying to pull, pretending to be a ghost?”

He glanced at Xue Xian's thin, pale, feeble-looking fingers and tried to pull away again. But those fingers were like iron clamps that showed no sign of loosening. The square-faced guard glared at Xue Xian.

"Let go!"

"Sure, sure," Xue Xian drawled. "First, tell me why the city gates are closed. Is there any room for negotiation?"

Though his words were polite, the force in his grip made it clear that this was a threat. At this, the other guards stepped forward, ready to surround them.

Xuanmin—still holding Xue Xian—closed his eyes, murmured something, then tapped the ground with his right foot. The guards felt the ground beneath them tremble unexpectedly.

"An earthquake?!" they shouted in horror. In a flash, they were jolted back to their original positions.

The recent earthquake in Anqing Prefecture had clearly left them off-kilter. After being shaken like this, the guards froze, exchanging worried glances and holding their breath, as if waiting for another tremor.

"Let go!" The square-faced guard, still caught in Xue Xian's grasp, was also uneasy. He hunched his body and tried to pull his wrist back again. "It's not that we don't want to tell you. As you can see, Qingping has been experiencing frequent earthquakes recently. The buildings are unstable, and there's an outbreak of disease. We're telling you to turn back for your own good, not to harm you!"

"Disease?" Xue Xian seized on the main point. "Qingping County is suffering an outbreak?"

Seeing that he couldn't get rid of them, the square-faced guard shook his head. "A few days ago, there was an earthquake. The ground cracked in several places, and some unknown black insects crawled out from underground. Some people in the county were bitten by these insects and developed rashes. The rashes are unbearably itchy and painful. If scratched, they break open and start to fester within two days. It's horrifying."

Jiang Shining couldn't help asking: "What about the doctors? Didn't they prescribe medicine in time?"

"No one knew what was going on at first. Some people couldn't bear it and went to see doctors, while others thought it was a minor ailment and treated it like one. Then, it turned out that this disease is contagious…" The guard lowered his voice, his tone wavering with terror. "It spreads terribly fast. Can't you smell the dregs of medicine all over the city?"

"Enough! Why waste words on them?" The other guards, seeing that the ground had stopped shaking, straightened up and tried to chase them off again.

If you keep getting in my way like this, I'm not going to hold back! I'm capable of anything, Xue Xian thought.

He had always been somewhat reckless. While these guards weren't unreasonable, Xue Xian and the others really needed to find a way into the city. If they kept blocking the way, he might just turn back into a dragon and fly over the city walls.

The guards were moments away from using force on the group when one of them, a dark-skinned man standing further back, uttered a sound of surprise.

“Brother Li, your neck!”

“What’s wrong?” At his tone, the square-faced guard instinctively reached to touch his neck. That morning, he’d felt something strange there but thought it was just his clothes rubbing against his skin. In his rush to get to his post, he hadn’t bothered to investigate.

“You’ve got a rash!” Another guard leaned closer under the lantern’s light and took a closer look, then immediately stepped back. “Two thumb-sized patches!”

The others, who’d been leaning over to take a look, scattered like a receding tide.

“Oh, so this is the rash you were talking about. You’ve got one on your hand too,” Xue Xian said calmly, squeezing the guard’s wrist bone and pointing to the webbing between his thumb and index finger. “See, there’s a small patch here as well.”

The square-faced guard stood there in shock.

Xue Xian glanced at the rash and suddenly had an idea—and his ideas were always…unconventional.

He hissed and looked at his hand that was gripping the guard’s wrist. “It really spreads fast! I’ve got it too.”

Hearing this, the guard looked down in shock and saw that Xue Xian’s hand was rapidly developing a large red rash. It spread from his fingertips to the back of his hand; in no time, his entire hand was red and swollen. It cut a stark contrast with the pale skin of his wrist, making the sight even more alarming.

The surrounding guards were left dumbfounded at this sight. The square-faced guard nearly forgot to breathe. He stared in horror as Xue Xian muttered, “What did you say happens after the rash appears?”

“Uh, it becomes unbearably itchy and painful, breaks open, and festers…” one of the guards replied.

“Oh, right!”

All the guards watched in stunned silence as Xue Xian’s hand began to rot, the flesh peeling off until a chunk of it fell to the ground with a soft plop.

“How bad does the rot get?” Xue Xian asked.

All the guards were too shocked to speak.

When no one answered, Xue Xian bit his tongue and decided to take it up a notch.

The square-faced guard let out a cry at the sight of Xue Xian’s decaying hand, the flesh curling away from bone, and tried to yank his hand back. But the moment he moved…

With a soft thud, Xue Xian’s entire hand, rotted through at the wrist, fell to the ground.

“See, I’ve been infected too. In this short time, my hand came off. I’m also half paralyzed and can’t walk. With me slowing them down, I’ll probably have rotted away completely by the time we make it to another county to get a doctor’s prescription,” Xue Xian said, pointing his exposed bone at Xuanmin, almost poking him in the face.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian’s wrist, then closed his eyes. Out of sight, out of mind. If he looked any longer, he might not be able to resist

throwing this trouble-stirring evil spirit to the ground.

"Shouldn't you let me into the city to find a doctor?" Xue Xian said, sounding very reasonable and earnest. "Answer me! Don't just stand there. If you keep standing there, you'll rot too."

The square-faced guard shuddered. In his state of shock, he stepped aside.

"Thank you," Xuanmin said indifferently. He strode into the city with his rotting passenger. As he moved, the guards on either side stepped back, pressing themselves against the city gate as if getting too close would cause them to start decaying like Xue Xian.

The guards watched their retreating figures, unable to snap out of their daze.

After a long while, one of the guards exclaimed, "Look!"

The others turned their heads and saw the guard pointing at the spot where Xue Xian had been standing.

"The hand… The hand is gone…"

There was only a branch of white plum blossoms where Xue Xian's hand had fallen.

Stunned, the guards chased after them, only to find that the group had turned down an alley and disappeared.

They were about to report to their captain when they noticed the square-faced guard still standing there like a statue.

"Li-ge, Li-ge?" the other guards called from a distance. "Don't just stand there, go see a doctor! If the clinic is busy, go to the nearest Fang family pharmacy to get some medicine. They've been prescribing a lot of

medicine recently, so they must know the formula by heart. We'll cover your post. Hurry back, okay?"

"Mm," Li mumbled in a daze. He propped his long saber against the city gate and stumbled toward the clinic in the western part of the city, his mind heavy with worry.

Meanwhile, Xuanmin and the others were following Jiang Shining in the opposite direction through an alley toward his elder sister's house in the east. As they walked, Shitou Zhang couldn't help nervously glancing backward, worried that a large group of guards might be chasing after them.

"Stop craning your neck. No one's following us," Xue Xian said, able to tell just by listening whether anyone was pursuing them. "Why are you being so cautious?"

The others thought: *Do you have the right to say that?* Every time they entered a new county, this wise one would cause some public spectacle, almost as if the trip would be wasted if he didn't cause a scene.

Jiang Shining had been to Anqing before, though not often, so he knew the way. They took a few turns, then arrived at a small gate. The entrance was small—it wasn't the main gate but a back door facing a narrow alley. On either side of the door were round stone carvings flanking two stone steps.

"The main gate leads to the pharmacy. It's always busy. Family members usually use this back door that leads to the backyard and the residence," Jiang Shining explained. He knocked on the door.

"Bald donkey, let me sit down for a bit," Xue Xian said, encouraging Xuanmin to set him down on one of the stone carvings. He raised his exposed wrist bone before he reached toward it—and somehow pulled his

real hand out of it. “Please, cast another Cleansing Spell. I accidentally got some tissue stuck on my sleeve.”

Shitou Zhang, Jiang Shining, who was knocking on the door, and even Lu Nianqi, who rarely interacted with the others, all turned their backs on him with expressions of disgust.

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian’s sleeve and also looked away. Given his aversion to filth, even that one glance was pushing his limits. He was clearly exasperated and refused to cast a Cleansing Spell. Why bother, when it wouldn’t be enough to cleanse the image of rotting flesh from his mind? Instead, he drew a line across Xue Xian’s elbow with his finger and sliced the sleeve. It fell away as if cut by a knife, leaving Xue Xian’s arm bare from the elbow down. Xuanmin gripped the blood-smeared half sleeve and lit it on fire with a talisman without another word. Soon, it was reduced to ashes.

Xue Xian, who had never imagined anyone daring to mar his clothes, let alone the bald donkey doing the honor, was left bare-armed and shocked. He stared for a few seconds, then lifted Xuanmin’s monk’s robes and vigorously wiped his regrown skin on them. He then thrust his clean hand in front of Xuanmin.

“Burn *your* clothes next,” Xue Xian snapped. “Since I’m bare-armed, you’ll have to go bare-legged to appease my anger.”

Jiang Shining eyed Xuanmin sympathetically and was about to say something when the narrow door in front of them creaked open.

A girl in her teens poked her head out. “Who is it?”

A familiar face! Recognizing her, Jiang Shining smiled and cupped his hands in greeting. “Oh, it’s Xing—”

Before he could finish, the girl let out a scream and slammed the door shut.

Jiang Shining stood in front of the closed door, bewildered, before realizing what had happened. For a moment, his expression wavered somewhere between regret and bemusement. It was hard to say which won.

Xue Xian glanced at Jiang Shining. Noticing his expression, he pointed at Shitou Zhang. “Old man, weren’t you afraid of ghosts? Are you still scared after seeing a ghost as foolish as him? Think about how you were trembling earlier. Doesn’t it seem a bit embarrassing now?”

Old man…

Shitou Zhang turned his head away and wiped his face, muttering to himself: “I just look old for my age. Sure, I’m not young anymore, but I can still carry loads, walk, and run. Calling me an old man seems a bit much, doesn’t it?”

But the guy in front of him was an important wise one, so he couldn’t afford to argue with him.

Jiang Shining had been on the edge of melancholy when his mood was swiftly swept aside by a casual remark from Xue Xian. He glared in Xue Xian’s direction.

“I guess this is what they mean by ‘bad company corrupts good character.’ Spending so much time with you all is lowering my intelligence.” He pulled up his robe and stepped aside, ushering them toward the door. “Since it’s broad daylight, I won’t haunt their doorstep any longer. Someone else should knock on the door.”

Everyone’s gaze turned to Shitou Zhang.

“Me… *Me?*” Shitou Zhang pointed uncertainly at his own nose. He hadn’t handled any of the challenges they’d faced on their journey so far. This was the first time he’d been asked to take the lead.

Xue Xian pointed at Lu Nianqi with a serious expression: “A fortune teller.” Then he pointed at himself: “A cripple.” He concluded with Xuanmin: “An alms seeker.” He shrugged. “Is there a single normal person here?”

It was a sorry situation. Shitou Zhang was the only one who could pass for average. Reluctantly, he stepped forward and knocked on the door again.

From inside the courtyard came another scream. The girl from earlier seemed even more terrified this time.

Shitou Zhang turned back with an innocent expression. “Once bitten, twice shy. Can’t blame her.” He softened his voice, coaxing her. “Open the door, little miss. There’s no ghost here… I’m a good person.”

They were all stupefied by the quality of his “good person” impression.

Xue Xian stared at Shitou Zhang’s shoulders for a moment, then reached out and yanked him back. “Enough. You could probably summon a ghost-killer like Zhong Kui with that act.”

“Xingzi, what’s all the shouting about?” an elderly woman’s voice called from inside the courtyard. “Don’t scare the guests in the front hall.”

“A-Aunt Chen, there’s a ghost!” the girl responded, sounding on the verge of tears.

“Nonsense, how could there be a ghost in broad daylight?” Aunt Chen replied, half amused, half exasperated. “Our medicine hall only saves lives, never harms anyone. What ghost are you talking about?”

“It’s true! I just saw little Jiang-shaoye[1] standing outside the door,” Xingzi insisted.

“Young Master…Jiang?” Aunt Chen paused. “You don’t mean…”

“Yes!” Xingzi said. “I heard knocking, and when I opened the door, he was standing there. He even smiled at me and called my name. How could I not recognize him?!”

The girl’s voice trembled like she was moments from a breakdown.

“There was knocking?”

“Yes, and more just now! I didn’t dare listen closely…”

Xue Xian, ever the troublemaker, chose the perfect moment to knock on the door again.

Knock, knock, knock…

Both the old woman and the girl inside were frightened to the point of tears. Xuanmin wordlessly grabbed Xue Xian’s mischievous hand and pulled it back.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the door creaked open again. The person who answered was an elderly man with graying hair and a gentle, respectful demeanor. Behind him stood two figures: the girl who had run off earlier, Xingzi, and a short elderly woman who must have been Aunt Chen.

To avoid further scaring anyone, Jiang Shining had already transformed back into his paper form and tucked himself into Xue Xian’s

pocket, though he couldn't resist peeking out to observe the situation. After all, he was the one who had caused this mess.

"Uncle Chen…" he softly murmured when he saw the gray-haired old man.

He knew everyone at the Fang Family Medicine Hall quite well—some very well, in fact. The Fang and Jiang families had been connected for many years, with one family practicing medicine and the other dealing in medicinal herbs. Their paths had crossed by chance, and they had maintained ties ever since. Jiang Shining had visited the Fang family as a child, and later, his sister had married into the family. When he was young, Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen had made him sweet buns.

Meeting them like this, separated by life and death, he couldn't call out to them.

Uncle Chen's hearing wasn't what it used to be, so he didn't catch Jiang Shining's soft murmur. Squinting his slightly cloudy eyes, he surveyed the group of weirdos at the door.

"May I ask what brings you here?" he asked politely.

Aunt Chen nudged Xingzi from behind. "Didn't you say you saw little Jiang-shaoye? Where is he? These people look normal."

Xingzi shook her head in confusion. She didn't understand what was happening either.

Once again, Shitou Zhang was pushed forward to explain. "Pardon the intrusion," he said, cupping his hands in a courteous gesture. Despite his usual timidity around Xue Xian and the others, he knew how to behave in front of ordinary people.

“We’ve come from Ningyang in Huizhou to look for—” He suddenly faltered, turning to Xue Xian with a questioning look. “Who are we looking for again?”

Before Xue Xian could answer, Aunt Chen interjected, “Are you here to see the young mistress?”

“Yes,” Jiang Shining whispered.

“Yes!” Shitou Zhang nodded.

“I knew it!” Xingzi blurted out. “It can’t be a coincidence. I just saw little Jiang-shaoye, and now people from Ningyang are here. I wasn’t seeing things after all! S-so…little Jiang-shaoye…”

Uncle Chen shushed her and turned back to Shitou Zhang, cupping his hands again. “Sir, if I may ask, do you have any proof of your identity?”

Shitou Zhang turned to the group with a bewildered expression, mouthing exaggeratedly: *Proof?*

Xue Xian was about to reply in the negative when he suddenly remembered something and clapped his hands. “Ah, right!” Without hesitation, he shoved his hand into Xuanmin’s hidden waist pouch.

Xuanmin grabbed the hand rummaging through his pouch. “What are you looking—”

“Found it,” Xue Xian said, twisting his wrist. “Let go.”

Xuanmin released his hand, and Xue Xian pulled out the silver medical bell. When Jiang Shining couldn’t carry it himself, Xue Xian had casually stuffed it into Xuanmin’s pouch. Now, he retrieved the bell just as casually, as if it were his own.

“Would this medical bell count as proof?” Xue Xian held out the bell.

He had been sitting on a stone carving by the door, partially hidden by Shitou Zhang. Now that he'd spoken, Aunt Chen and the others noticed him. Xingzi's eyes swept over him, and her face flushed with heat. She hid behind Uncle Chen.

Uncle Chen took the silver bell. He noticed the character "Jiang" engraved on the side of the bell. It only took him a single glance to say, "I've seen this before. Dr. Jiang always carried it."

He handed it back to Xue Xian. However, the Jiang family hadn't died of natural causes—they had perished in a fire. It was only natural for Uncle Chen to be suspicious when strangers showed up with the Jiang family's belongings.

"You are…from the Jiang family?" Uncle Chen asked cautiously.

"Neighbors," Shitou Zhang said, opting for a safer term since they couldn't claim to be relatives. "We were entrusted by little Jiang-shaoye Shining to deliver this family heirloom to his elder sister. There are also some unresolved matters regarding his parents that we need to discuss with her."

"No wonder," Xingzi suddenly said. "But the young mistress isn't here right now. Would you like to come in and have some tea while you wait?"

Her attitude was a complete turnaround from her earlier terror, leaving Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen stunned. *Weren't you the one screaming in fear just a moment ago?*

But the girl didn't seem to notice Aunt Chen's look. Her gaze kept drifting back to Xue Xian.

“Thank you,” Shitou Zhang said without hesitation. After all the trials they’d been through—flying through the sky, diving into water—a seat and a cup of hot tea were more than welcome.

Since Xingzi had invited them in and Shitou Zhang had accepted, Uncle Chen had no choice but to usher the group inside. Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen led the way, while Xingzi lingered by the door, holding it open.

Shitou Zhang entered first, followed by Lu Nianqi, who stumbled slightly as he crossed the threshold. Uncle Chen noticed and turned back. He hesitated. “Young master…”

“I’m half blind,” Lu Nianqi replied coldly, to Uncle Chen’s silence.

Xingzi lingered behind Lu Nianqi, intending to guide Xue Xian, who was still sitting on the stone carving. Then, she could only stare as she watched Xuanmin scoop Xue Xian up into his arms.

Uncle Chen turned back and saw this scene, prompting him to ask, “And this gentleman…?”

“Half paralyzed,” Xue Xian said matter-of-factly.

Uncle Chen had to wonder, what kind of group was this? A half-paralyzed man, a half-blind boy, a middle-aged man of modest stature, and a monk who barely spoke…

They didn’t seem like much of a threat. Uncle Chen decided to set aside his doubts and welcomed them inside.

“When will your young mistress return?” Xue Xian asked Xingzi, noticing her flushed face. He found her amusing—naive and without a hint of guile. When he wasn’t causing trouble, Xue Xian could be quite charming. His words were polite, but his tone carried a lazy, nonchalant air.

Xingzi's face turned even redder at his question. "Um, the young mistress went to examine Madam Zhao. The young master went with her. They left before dawn and should be back within the hour."

"Examine?"

"Our young mistress is amazing!" Xingzi said proudly. "All the ladies in the county come to her when they're unwell. She's very accurate in her diagnoses, and her treatments always work. It's just…a little tiring for her."

As expected of someone from a medical family, Xue Xian thought. Still, as everyone marveled at her skill, the group couldn't help but feel a twinge of worry. With the plague rumored to be rampant in Qingping County, doctors were the most susceptible to infection…

They sat drinking tea in a guest hall in the backyard, expecting to wait for a while. However, before they could finish a cup of tea, a disheveled boy around ten years old stumbled into the courtyard.

"It's bad, it's bad! Something's happened to the young master and mistress!" he shouted.

Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen, who were carrying a tea tray into the room, were startled. The tray clattered to the ground, scattering porcelain shards that hit Shitou Zhang's and Xuanmin's legs. They were so shocked that they forgot to apologize.

"Something's happened?!"

Four voices rang out in unison: Uncle Chen's, Aunt Chen's, Xingzi's…and Jiang Shining's. But in the urgency of the moment, no one noticed his voice.

“What happened?!” Aunt Chen grabbed the boy who had come to deliver the news. “Speak up, child! Why are you the only one back?”

The boy, who had clearly run the whole way, was gasping for breath and spoke in broken sentences. “The young master…” He heaved another breath. “When we turned the corner onto Jiqing Street, seven or eight beggars suddenly jumped out from a dead-end alley. They kidnapped the young master and mistress! They were so fast, it was like they’d been lying in wait!”

Everyone exclaimed in shock.

“What?! Kidnapped?! Where did they take them?”

“I-I don’t know!” The boy was on the verge of tears and filled with guilt. “The young master and mistress pushed me aside, and I fell to the ground. By the time I got up, they were gone. I couldn’t catch up, and I couldn’t find them.” He began to sob. “I’m useless…”

“Did you see which direction they went?” Xuanmin interjected.

The boy seemed to notice the strangers in the room for the first time. He was taken aback by the question. “S-south, but there are too many alleys there. They disappeared after a few turns.”

“Find something your young master and mistress touched recently.” Xuanmin’s gaze landed on Lu Nianqi.

“Right, we have a human compass,” Xue Xian said, patting Lu Nianqi’s head like he was a treasure. Lu Nianqi expressionlessly brushed his hand away.

“Something they recently touched?” Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen were confused.

Xingzi, however, was quick-witted. She clapped her hands. “A handkerchief! Will a handkerchief do?”

“Sure,” Xue Xian said. “Please fetch the handkerchief.”

Xingzi, still red, hurried out of the room and returned moments later with the handkerchief. “Here—but what’s it for?”

“To find where your young master and mistress are.”

Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen were completely baffled by what was happening. They rushed around the room like ants on a hot pan.

Lu Nianqi produced his wooden stick and hovered it over the embroidered handkerchief, then drew a series of lines on the ground. His actions looked like those of a shaman performing a ritual, leaving Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen, and Xingzi astonished.

“What is this…?” one of them murmured.

Lu Nianqi exuded an aura of profound mystery as he retracted his wooden stick and traced the marks on the ground. He spoke with the demeanor of a sage: “Is there a mountain path nearby with slopes made of piled stones on either side? The slopes are covered with wild woods, and in the woods…” He traced the marks again. “There’s a grave with a small pond beside it. Next to the pond is a black rock shaped like a crouching turtle…”

Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen looked increasingly puzzled as he described the scene. When he mentioned the turtle-shaped black rock, their expressions changed. “There is such a place, yes!”

“Where?”

“Mount Xiaonan!”

About five minutes later, a carriage appeared on the stone path at the foot of Mount Xiaonan in Qingping County. Inside the carriage were Xue Xian and his companions. Uncle Chen was driving.

For the sake of convenience and efficiency, Xue Xian's group had planned to take with them someone who knew the way and could drive the carriage. Uncle Chen seemed calm by nature, so even if he saw something unusual, he could probably handle it. Xue Xian, Xuanmin, and Lu Nianqi boarded the carriage—then silently watched as Xingzi and Aunt Chen *also* climbed inside.

"So…why did you two come along again?" Xue Xian asked eventually. After all, even Shitou Zhang had been left behind at the Fang residence.

Aunt Chen was an excitable person. At the question, she slapped her thigh and nearly wailed. "Before the old mistress passed away last year, she entrusted the young master and mistress to me and Uncle Chen. It's only been a year, and now they're gone! How can I face her? Oh, Mistress—"

She was about to let out a long wail when Xue Xian raised a finger and waved it. "Shh, all right, all right. I understand."

Aunt Chen's eyes widened as she found her mouth sealed shut.

There were no armrests in the carriage, so Xue Xian, acting like a lord, leaned back against the carriage wall. With nowhere to rest his elbow, he used Xuanmin's leg as an armrest, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "And you, miss—?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Xuanmin glance at his elbow and raise his hand, like he had some thoughts about removing the audacious limb from his knee. Xue Xian turned, ready to play rogue versus bald

donkey, but then he noticed Xuanmin gazing around the carriage. Seeming to think better of it, Xuanmin retracted his hand and let Xue Xian do as he pleased.

Huh? Xue Xian wondered what *that* was about.

But Xingzi's tearful words interrupted his thinking. "I've been with the mistress for over five years. If something happens to her, how will I live? I'm just so anxious, I couldn't sit still at home. Please don't make me get off the carriage. I promise I won't cause any trouble."

"Causing trouble isn't the issue. I don't mind having more people along, but…you should be prepared for what's to come."

Aunt Chen and Xingzi blinked, not understanding what he meant.

"All right, things have settled," Lu Nianqi said before anyone else could speak up. "They've stopped moving and are now in one place. It's…a deserted village? Why are the houses all crumbling?"

"A deserted village?! You mean Wen Village? Oh heavens, why would they go there? That place has been abandoned for years. Not only is it deserted, but it's *haunted*! Going there is a death sentence!"

"A ghost village?"

Aunt Chen slapped the carriage wall several times. "Lao-Chen, Lao-Chen! Lives are at stake—hurry that horse up!"

They were still taking the road to Mount Xiaonan because Lu Nianqi, the half-baked fortune teller, was only intermittently accurate. With the kidnappers constantly on the move, they'd needed to get closer to pinpoint their location. Now that the kidnappers had stopped, Xue Xian had no patience to continue chasing them in a meandering fashion.

"Hold on tight," Xue Xian said meaningfully to Aunt Chen and Xingzi across from him.

Just as Aunt Chen settled down, the carriage jolted. "Ah!" She was startled, thinking the carriage had hit a bumpy patch of road. She grabbed

onto the wooden slats on the carriage wall. Then, without warning, a fierce wind howled. The entire carriage tilted sharply. The horse pulling the carriage let out a panicked whinny.

"What's happening? What's going on?!" Aunt Chen nearly lost her grip on the slats and was on the verge of tears again. Xingzi clung tightly to her arm, shrieking.

"Miss, please keep it down," Xue Xian said, raising a hand. The carriage door slammed with a bang. "The door's shut tight. You won't fall out."

Aunt Chen and Xingzi stared at him with wide eyes, as if they'd seen a ghost. "Did you touch the door…?" Xingzi asked dazedly. "How did it—"

Before she could recover from the shock, she felt the tilting carriage suddenly become weightless, and her heart skipped a beat. It was as if the entire carriage had been lifted into the air.

The old woman and the young girl lifted the carriage curtain…and screamed in unison.

"Ahhh!"

"We're flying!"

Xue Xian pressed a finger into his ear, regretting his rash decision. He poked Xuanmin in the side. "Bald donkey, bring the one in front into—"

Before he could finish, the carriage was filled with another blood-curdling scream. *"Aaaah!"*

So much for being calm.

Xuanmin stuck his snow-white sleeve outside the carriage curtain. With a thud, Uncle Chen's screaming head crashed into the carriage. His

eyes were shut.

As Uncle Chen flailed blindly, Xuanmin tugged him in through the window. However, he remained screaming from his position on the carriage floor.

Once everyone was inside, Xue Xian stretched one arm outside the carriage like a lazy cat and waved his hand. Xingzi gaped in a daze. The carriage tilted again, and this time Aunt Chen lost her grip, falling to one side. Xingzi, still stupefied, was knocked over and fell onto Lu Nianqi, who was sitting at the edge of the seat. He clutched his wooden stick tighter as he slammed against the carriage wall with a thud. In the aftermath, he wore an expression of utter defeat.

The howling wind summoned by Xue Xian lifted the carriage higher into the air, and the horse's whinnies echoed as they shot toward the clouds.

As quick as lightning, they soon descended from the clouds and hurtled toward the ground. Inside the carriage, Aunt Chen and Xingzi were frozen in shock. They slid to the other side of the carriage wall as it tilted. Lu Nianqi silently slid with them.

For Aunt Chen and Xingzi, it felt like only a breath had passed before the carriage landed again.

"We're here," Xue Xian said, flicking a finger. The carriage door swung open, revealing their surroundings.

They were by a deserted village that was just as Aunt Chen had described. The houses were dilapidated and eerie, overgrown with weeds, and devoid of any signs of life. Even though the sky was brightening and the east was turning white—the freshest time of day—the place felt too ominous to enter. A crow cawed hoarsely as it flew out of the deserted

village, making Xingzi and the others shiver and shrink back into the carriage.

Because the village was uninhabited, even the slightest sound was amplified. Just as Xuanmin stepped out of the carriage, a woman's scream echoed from deep within the village.

"That's the mistress!" Xingzi cried out. "That's her voice! She's really in there!"

Xuanmin tilted his head.

"Wait here," he said to Xue Xian before walking off toward the source of the scream.

Xue Xian, leaning against the carriage wall like a lord, nodded. "All right, saves me the trouble. Hurry back."

Xuanmin frowned as he surveyed the village's feng shui. To be honest, the village did have some serious issues. It was like an empty shell, missing something crucial. That absence had turned what should have been an excellent location into a dead zone. As for what that thing was…

Xuanmin pondered for a moment, then strode forward. As he walked, he reached for the string of copper coins at his waist.

There was nothing there.

Xue Xian, who had shifted to lean against the carriage door, narrowed his eyes as he watched Xuanmin's retreating figure.

There he goes…

Then he saw Xuanmin, who had only walked a few steps, turn back.

Xue Xian tilted his head up as Xuanmin approached the carriage door. The latter lightly rapped the outer wall of the carriage with his

knuckles and extended his slender, elegant hand toward Xue Xian.

"What do you want?" Xue Xian asked. He really didn't know.

"The copper coins."

Inside the carriage, Xingzi stared at Xuanmin's face, thinking to herself how handsome the monk was. She glanced at Xue Xian and thought he was equally stunning.

However... Her mind was in turmoil, struck by a thunderbolt of realization: *Why is this monk asking for money from Xue-gongzi?*[2]

Before she could figure it out, Xuanmin, now holding a string of copper coins, turned on his heel and strode again into the deserted village.

The faint clinking of the copper coins echoed softly, carried by the strange winds of the village, adding layers of reverberation.

Xue Xian tapped his fingers rhythmically on his numb knees, matching the sound of the coins, waiting for Xuanmin to finish quickly.

However, after a while, his slender fingers paused in their tapping. Something was wrong. It had been quite some time, and Xuanmin's figure had disappeared, yet the sound of the coins hadn't grown fainter at all.

The crisp clinking abruptly distorted. Then, a faint buzzing noise rose from beneath the ground, sounding eerily familiar.

The buzzing filled Xue Xian's ears until his mind went blank for a moment.

A long-forgotten scene resurfaced in his memory.

It was during the early summer, on the coast of Huameng County, right before his tendons and bones were ripped out. Countless golden

threads descended from the sky. Some pierced his body, pinning him to the ground, while others wrapped around his scales, tightening like a massive cage.

The golden threads were as fine as hair. Even when they pierced his body, they didn't cause much bleeding because the wounds were too small. However, the lack of blood didn't mean there was no pain. The threads blazed, scorching his bones from within and his scales from without. The slightest movement caused him excruciating pain, far worse than being devoured by ten thousand ants.

But who was Xue Xian? If he wanted to move, then even if ten thousand arrows pierced his heart and pinned him to the ground, he would endure the agony and pull them out one by one before twisting off the head of whoever dared to harm him. Physical pain had never been enough to stop him.

The only reason he hadn't ripped himself free had been because it was the day of a once-in-a-century calamity.

Calamities came in different forms, but most often, they were lightning tribulations. For Xue Xian, these were the least fearsome. When a true dragon emerged from the sea, it was always accompanied by thunderclouds. He was used to it—in terms of spectacle, at least. No matter how terrifying the lightning was, it wouldn't make him blink. Ordinary lightning rarely struck him, as it often came at his behest. Even if it did, it was nothing more than a tickle.

The lightning during a tribulation was different. It didn't avoid him; instead, it chased him, striking with one bolt after another. Each hit drew blood. The lightest wounds left his flesh torn, but worse was the pain of

damage to his true spirit. *That* was unbearable. If his cultivation wasn't strong enough, his spirit could be shattered, and he would turn to dust on the spot.

To survive, most people facing a calamity would go to great lengths to create barriers for themselves using whatever means necessary. Xue Xian couldn't do that, because his every movement affected the vast rivers, lakes, and seas of the mortal world. If he stirred, the waters would become turbulent. Places prone to flooding would be on the brink of disaster, and a single misstep could submerge entire cities.

Therefore, Xue Xian usually reverted to his dragon form during calamities. His massive body provided enough surface area for the lightning to strike without completely destroying him. If he were in human form, he would be reduced to a bloody mess, which was hardly presentable.

During minor calamities, he would find a deserted island, stretch out, and let the lightning strike him as it pleased. Afterward, he would sleep there until his wounds healed and the bleeding stopped, then slip into the sea to recover his true spirit before causing more mischief.

However, during major calamities, he couldn't be so careless. The lightning during such events was too powerful for mortal locations to withstand. If it struck a deserted island, the island would be shattered and sink into the sea after a few bolts. If it struck a populated area, it would cause even greater disaster.

To prevent the lightning from harming the mortal world, Xue Xian would soar into the sky and wrap himself in thick black clouds. The thunderbolts would descend from the heavens, stop within the clouds, and

strike him alone. To the people below, the thunder would sound terrifying but cause no harm.

This past early summer, Xue Xian had faced a major calamity. That calamity had been more grueling than usual, leaving his spirit severely damaged. Unable to remain in the clouds, he had plummeted to the coast.

Damage to the true spirit caused confusion and unconsciousness. When the countless golden threads had bound him and pinned him to the ground, he could barely open his eyes, let alone see who was behind it or break free. For a long time afterward, he couldn't even remember the scene clearly; fragments of it only haunted him like nightmares.

Now, as his mind trembled, that forgotten scene flashed before his eyes. Was it a coincidence or something else? Either way, Xue Xian was left momentarily stunned by the recollection.

At the end of those fine golden threads there had been a figure. Someone dressed in white, it seemed. However, their details were obscured, leaving only a silhouette. They were tall and slender, their robes fluttering in the wind. Strands of hair, whipping through the air like their robes, framed their face.

Somehow, there was something undeniably strange about it.

As the buzzing in his mind subsided, Xue Xian finally emerged from that memory. He heard a woman's concerned voice beside him.

"What's wrong with you? Wake up!"

"Miss Xingzi, stop shaking me, or my head might fall off…" Xue Xian pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes still closed as he spouted nonsense.

“You’re awake?!” Xingzi exclaimed in delight before she realized she’d been so panicked that she’d grabbed Xue Xian by the shoulders. She yanked her hands back as if burned. “You suddenly lost consciousness, and we couldn’t even feel your breath. We were so scared, and I just… Um…”

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow and lazily opened his eyes. He squinted and touched the spot between his nose and upper lip. “So you pinched my philtrum?”

Xingzi leaned against the carriage wall, staring at the ceiling as if she had been wronged beyond redemption. “Yes, I pinched it.”

“Thanks for the effort,” Xue Xian said with a slight smile. He turned much more serious as he looked toward the deserted village.

“Huh?” Xingzi, surprised by the thanks, blushed and waved her hands. “No need to thank me. I’m just glad you’re awake.”

Of course, Xue Xian wasn’t listening to her anymore. His gaze was fixed on one spot in the village. Why was there *still* no sign of Xuanmin?

“That bald—” Xue Xian cut himself off, thinking it might be inappropriate to refer to Xuanmin that way in front of strangers. He coughed and adopted a more formal tone. “How long was I out? Did the monk do anything after entering the village?”

“Anything?” Xingzi shook her head, her face filled with worry. “It’s been about ten minutes, and we haven’t heard anything. Should we…go in and look for him?”

Perhaps the earlier flight through the sky had intimidated the three mortals in the carriage. Despite their growing anxiety, they obediently followed Xue Xian’s lead, not daring to take matters into their own hands.

Nonetheless, with so much time having passed, who knew what dangers might have arisen?

Xue Xian frowned and flicked at his waist. “Bookworm, why haven’t you said anything?” He had no qualms about calling out to Jiang Shining. These mortals had already flown through the sky; why would they be afraid of ghosts?

But it was strange. With his elder sister and brother-in-law kidnapped and taken into this eerie village, Jiang Shining hadn’t even poked his head out. It was unlike him.

“Bookworm? Jiang Shining?”

At the mention of the name, Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen, and Xingzi all turned to look at Xue Xian.

“Little Jiang-shaoye… Did you just call for him?” Aunt Chen asked, her voice trembling.

“Yep,” Xue Xian said. He opened the pouch at his waist to check for him.

It was empty. Great.

Jiang Shining was long gone. Xue Xian gazed toward the village with his face flat—that fool ghost must have slipped away with Xuanmin in the chaos.

The sky gradually brightened, but the early morning was cold and heavy with moisture. The entire village was shrouded in a thick white mist, with only the dark outlines of the dilapidated houses visible.

Xue Xian called without turning his head: “Lu Nianqi?”

“I’m here,” Lu Nianqi quietly responded from within the carriage. “What do you need?”

His tone sounded somewhat resigned, as he was currently sandwiched between two shaking figures—Uncle Chen on his left and Aunt Chen on his right. The couple, perhaps viewing Xue Xian as some kind of divine being, didn’t dare approach him. They instead huddled close to Lu Nianqi for comfort.

“Can you figure out what that bald…Xuanmin is doing right now?” Xue Xian asked, his eyes still fixed on the mist.

“I can try,” Lu Nianqi said, “but I’ll need something the monk recently touched.” Xue Xian was about to speak when Lu Nianqi cut him off. “The carriage is too big. It won’t work.”

Xue Xian fell silent, thought for a moment, then turned and extended a hand into the carriage. “Will my hand do?”

Silence fell. Something felt off…or maybe *everything* felt off.

“Living things won’t work either. I can only scry with inanimate objects,” Lu Nianqi said, unafraid of Xue Xian’s potential wrath. “Unless you’re willing to sacrifice yourself, I can try calculating.”

Xue Xian snorted coldly and turned away.

Chapter 21:
The Benevolent Lord

AT THAT MOMENT, deeper inside the desolate Wen Village, a heated argument erupted from a large mansion.

It was a two-story building with two structures connected by a long corridor, forming a square courtyard. It was unclear what had originally been planted in the yard, but only waist-high wild grass and a withered old tree remained. The windows of the various rooms were decayed, the paper long torn. The wind howled through the hallways, creating an eerie, unsettling sound that could send shivers down anyone's spine.

The argument was coming from the eastern room on the first floor of the front building, the only room not exposed to the wind. A hoarse and resentful male voice rang out from within.

"Didn't you say that listening to you would be the right move? Now look at us. We can't even get out!"

"What else could we do? If we'd kept going, would Old Liu, Jianzi, and Xiao-Shitou still be alive?" another voice retorted. "At least here we have a roof over our heads to keep the rain off. Why didn't you complain this morning when you found those mushrooms?"

In the eastern room, several people dressed as beggars were huddled together. They were all disheveled and filthy, and their clothes, which looked like they hadn't been washed in ages, emitted a sour, rotten smell. But that wasn't the only odor in this room—mingled with the stench of decay was the heavy scent of blood.

The man with the hoarse voice had arms that ended abruptly at the wrists. The skin on his wrists had been worn smooth, indicating that his hands had been severed many years, if not decades, ago.

A fire burned in front of the man with no hands, and a cracked clay pot rested on a wooden branch above the flames. The pot was boiling vigorously. The man muttered to himself, then used his wrists to scoop some wild vegetable leaves from a pile beside him and tossed them into the pot.

“What’s the point of having food if we don’t even know if we’ll live to see tomorrow…”

“Well, if we don’t eat, we definitely won’t survive. Just keep boiling the soup!”

It was the same person who had spoken who’d replied. His face was covered in horrifying scars, and he only had one eye. His other eyelid was sealed shut and sunken, suggesting that the eyeball was long gone.

Around these two arguing men sat a circle of other beggars, some missing arms, others legs. A few who still had all their limbs were making large gestures, likely because they were deaf or mute.

Behind them was a wooden bed, on which lay three people—an old man and two children: the very Old Liu, Jianzi, and Xiao-Shitou that the one-eyed man had mentioned. They were covered with tattered, hole-ridden blankets that carried a faint musty smell, but at least they provided some cover.

The three lying on the bed were breathing heavily and running fevers. Their faces were pale with an unnatural flush, and their lips were blistered and cracked. The skin on their necks, exposed outside the blankets, was

almost entirely covered in large, festering wounds. The heavy smell of blood emanated from these three individuals.

In the corner of the room, a young man and woman sat huddled together. They had gentle, refined features and a composed aura. Although their plain robes were simple and unadorned, they were neither torn nor moldy. Their hair was a little disheveled, but they stood out starkly among the group of ragged beggars.

This young man and woman were Jiang Shining's sister, Jiang Shijing, and her husband, Fang Cheng.

Fang Cheng turned his head and whispered to his wife. "A-Ying, are you hurt?"

They had known each other since childhood, so Fang Cheng always called his wife by her pet name. Jiang Shijing shook her head.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Don't be afraid. It doesn't seem like they want to kill us or rob us. It seems more like…"

Both of their gazes fell on the bed where the three sick individuals lay.

After the beggars had abducted them, they had untied the ropes binding their limbs, leaving only the ropes around their wrists.

"We have no other choice," one of the beggars had gruffly said.

Before they could explain themselves further, the room filled with an eerie noise. It sounded like someone slowly descending the stairs, their footsteps heavy and dragging, as if they were either in poor health or very old.

The beggars stilled and exchanged uneasy glances.

One of them counted the people in the room: “Five, six…seven, plus Old Liu and the other two. That makes ten. Everyone’s here.”

The expressions of the beggars shifted to visible fear. If everyone was in the room, then who was the person descending the stairs?

“Stop with the ghostly nonsense,” one of the braver beggars spat out. He left the room to investigate who was coming down the stairs.

Time passed, but he never returned. Even after the footsteps faded, he was nowhere to be seen.

Two other beggars went out together to look for him.

When they returned, they reported that they’d searched everywhere, upstairs and downstairs, in front of and behind the building, but had found no trace of the missing man. As they looked, a thick fog rolled into the village, so dense that they couldn’t even see or feel the house next door.

This bizarre situation reminded the beggars of the legends about Wen Village being haunted. They became so terrified that they huddled around the fire, and no one dared to leave the room again.

The one-eyed man turned to Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing.

“Would you two doctors like some of this mushroom and wild vegetable soup? You won’t be able to leave for a while. Have some soup to warm yourselves up. Consider it our way of apologizing, and please don’t hold this against us. Could you take a look at Old Liu and the others? They’re covered in sores, and if this continues, they won’t survive. We really had no other choice but to resort to desperate measures.”

“Even though we’re not living like proper humans, we’re still afraid of death,” the man with no hands added. “But we can’t scrape together enough coins to hire a doctor or buy medicine, so we had to turn to banditry…”

It was just as the couple had guessed.

Fang Cheng shook his head. “There have been many disasters in the past two years, with several famines. Life has been hard, and if you can’t afford to pay, then you can’t. But if you had come to us for help, could we really have turned you away? If I were to refuse treatment for the sake of a few coins, my wife would be the first to object. But…” He stared hard at the one-eyed man. “Grabbing people off the street and tying them up is going too far. With the effort you put into capturing us, you could have done something else.”

“We’ve thought about finding honest work, but no one wants to hire us.” The man with no hands raised his wrist. “People like us, with missing limbs, can’t work as well as those who are whole. Anyone willing to hire us would be offering us a charity. In these times of disaster, when people can barely take care of themselves, who has the energy for charity?”

“No one wants to hire you?” Fang Cheng said irritably. “Did you even ask me if I would hire you before you kidnapped me? If you had asked, ‘I can’t pay you, but can I work to pay off the debt?’ how do you know I wouldn’t have agreed?”

The man with no hands was about to speak again when the slow footsteps on the stairs echoed once more.

Everyone in the room froze in fear, not daring to move.

“Gouzi, you’re closest to the door. Go shut it!” the one-eyed man hissed.

Gouzi, a young man missing an arm, sprang up like a startled bird, dashed to the door, and slammed it shut. He then scurried back to the fire, staring fearfully at the closed door.

The one-legged beggar next to Gouzi shifted his weight on his hand.

“I’ve heard, just *heard*, mind you, that Wen Village is haunted every year,” he whispered. “They say that at the end of winter, ghostly opera music fills the abandoned village, gongs and drums echo far into the night, and there’s eerie singing too… Oh, it’s terrifying.”

“Yes, yes, and they also say that if you accidentally enter the village on a foggy day, you’ll never find your way out.”

“You can also hear coughing, clapping, or laughter…”

The beggars chattered on, scaring themselves silly. They huddled together, quivering, until the one-eyed man, his face pale, interrupted them with a gesture for silence.

The slow footsteps seemed to emerge from a room upstairs and descend the stairs once more. They walked a few steps in the hall and stopped, as if someone had sat down in a chair. After a moment, the footsteps began again and continued their slow, dragging pace. They grew closer to the eastern room, becoming clearer and clearer until they stopped right outside the door.

Everyone in the room felt their neck prickle, and they stared at the door in terrified silence. The door was so decayed that even if it were

locked, one could knock it down with a little pushing. It offered scant protection.

A few weak coughs sounded from outside the door. The coughing was faint, as if it came from someone seriously ill. A few heavy breaths followed, and then the footsteps dragged away toward the opposite room.

The people in the room let out a collective sigh of relief.

Their relief was short-lived. They heard the door of the opposite room creak open, only to close a few seconds later. Then, the footsteps began to creep back toward their room.

While the beggars were pale and sweating from fear, the people in the carriage by the village's stone stele breathed a sigh of relief—because they'd just seen a figure emerge from the thick fog. The monk's fluttering white robes almost blended into the white mist.

"Master! The master is back!" Xingzi called out.

Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen, who were in the carriage, quickly let go of Lu Nianqi and scrambled to the door to peer out. "What about the young master and young mistress? Are they back too?"

They stared at Xuanmin and the fog wrapped around him but were disappointed to see that he was alone. Meanwhile, Xue Xian, who was watching Xuanmin's silhouette, frowned slightly.

Xuanmin strode through the fog and reached the carriage.

"M-Master, you d-didn't find our young master and mistress?" Aunt Chen asked.

"I found their location, but I couldn't get close."

"Couldn't get close?"

Xuanmin nodded. “However—”

Before he could finish, Aunt Chen and Uncle Chen collapsed onto the carriage floor, their eyes threatening to spill over with tears.

Xue Xian, however, narrowed his eyes and scrutinized Xuanmin from head to toe, then asked out of the blue, “When did you shave your head and become a monk?”

Xuanmin turned to him with a puzzled expression. “When I was a child. Why?”

“Are you sure? Didn’t you say you don’t remember your past?”

Xue Xian’s tone was unreadable, neither cold nor warm. Why would he suddenly demand to know this?

Because the moment Xuanmin had emerged from the fog, his silhouette had looked strikingly similar to the figure at the end of the golden thread—the same flapping white robes, the same tall and slender build, the same extraordinary abilities. The only difference was that the figure at the end of the golden thread seemed to have the shadow of hair by their face.

Although Xuanmin didn’t know Xue Xian’s reason, he still answered. “I can recall some scenes from my childhood.”

But something in Xue Xian’s expression was too serious, or his tone was too inscrutable. Xuanmin paused and met Xue Xian’s eyes with his dark, calm ones. “I’m sure.”

Since the conversation at the inn, Xue Xian had gained a deeper understanding of Xuanmin’s character—or rather, he had become certain of one thing. This bald donkey had at least one redeeming quality: He didn’t lie. If he didn’t remember something, he wouldn’t fabricate a false memory

to appease the questioner. He would simply admit he didn't remember. If he did remember but couldn't speak of it, he would state that it was not for discussion, without tailoring his answer to suit the questioner's expectations.

So, Xuanmin's "I'm sure" carried weight. It meant he *did* remember fragmented scenes from his childhood, and in those scenes he was already a monk.

Upon hearing this, Xue Xian did not nod, shake his head, or respond. Instead, he continued to stare at Xuanmin.

At this reaction, Xuanmin calmly asked, "You don't believe me?"

"No." Xue Xian reached out and hooked a finger, gesturing for Xuanmin. "Come a bit closer."

"Hmm?" Xuanmin responded in a deep voice. Though he was confused, he leaned forward a few inches. He thought Xue Xian had something to say that he didn't want Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen to hear, so he waited in earnest for Xue Xian to say something.

What he got was the hand of an evil spirit patting his head.

"Tsk tsk, you poor thing," Xue Xian said. "Were you really shaved so young?"

Xuanmin couldn't believe what he was hearing. Xue Xian was getting out of hand. If no one disciplined him for three days, he'd tear the roof off with his antics.

The people in the carriage were stunned by Xue Xian's actions, especially Xingzi, who even forgot to cry.

Aren't these two…a bit too *close?* she thought to herself. Her big, round eyes focused on Xue Xian, but she accidentally met Xuanmin's gaze.

He *was* handsome, especially his unruffled eyes that radiated stability and reliability—as if no one needed to fret as long as he wasn't worried, because he always had some solution. But for some reason, when she met those eyes, she felt guilty, though she couldn't say why.

Before Xingzi could look away, Xuanmin averted his gaze. He seemed nonplussed as he grasped Xue Xian's jutting wrist and pulled it downward. Perhaps to prevent the dragon from taking advantage of the situation again, Xuanmin kept his fingers wrapped around Xue Xian's wrist.

Xue Xian snorted through his nose. "What, is your head so precious that it can't be touched?"

Xuanmin ignored him.

In fact, he wasn't gripping Xue Xian that tightly, and the latter could have easily pulled away. But he didn't. The warmth from Xuanmin's fingers penetrated Xue Xian's skin until the temperature of his wrist matched his hand.

Xue Xian's indolent gaze fell upon Xuanmin's fingers. In his mind, he once again conjured the silhouette of the figure at the end of the golden thread. It really did look just like Xuanmin, except for the shadow of hair.

But Xuanmin had been a monk since childhood, and Xue Xian's tendons had been extracted in early summer this year. That detail didn't match up. For Xue Xian, as long as Xuanmin wasn't that person, it was fine. In fact, it was for the best.

Otherwise—

Xue Xian decisively cut off that thought and changed the subject.

“You said you found their location but couldn’t get close. You also said ‘however.’ However what? Can’t you see these people are going to cry from suspense?”

At this, Uncle Chen’s and Aunt Chen’s hopeful eyes shone.

Xuanmin straightened up, glanced into the depths of the fog-shrouded village, and raised his other hand. He loosened his grip. With a clink, his string of copper coins dangled and swayed between his fingers. Xuanmin released Xue Xian’s wrist and tapped the five copper coins in a specific order, his expression unbothered.

“Indeed, I couldn’t get close. However—if I can’t go over there, I’ll just bring it over here.”

With that, he closed his fingers, and the string of coins emitted a low hum.

Suddenly, the red thread tightened. A loud booming noise echoed from the depths of the abandoned village, as if something had been uprooted from the ground.

The people in the carriage were startled by the noise, exchanging glances. Just as they were beginning to feel uneasy, a black shape appeared in the thick white fog.

“Heavens, look! What’s that?” Xingzi cried out, tugging at Aunt Chen’s sleeve and pointing into the air.

The black shadow rapidly approached, its outline quickly becoming clear: It was an entire dilapidated mansion, along with the patch of land it stood on.

Xuanmin had uprooted it and dragged it toward them.

Crash!

The mansion landed before them, taking root on the barren ground.

Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen, and Xingzi were stunned to discover what Xuanmin meant by "bring it here." They had never imagined such a grandiose method of relocation. For a moment, they gawked with their mouths open.

As the mansion settled, they could hear screams coming from one of the rooms inside.

Xue Xian noticed a thin figure clinging to the mansion's door, desperately holding onto the door knocker.

"Bookworm, are you trying to become a door ornament?" he teased.

The thin figure was none other than Jiang Shining, who had slipped out of Xue Xian's pocket. Waiting in the carriage for news of his sister was something he simply couldn't bear. As Xue Xian had guessed, he had taken advantage of the chaos to slip away and follow Xuanmin into the abandoned village. He had also tracked Xuanmin to the location where his sister and brother-in-law were. But unlike Xuanmin, who was human and couldn't approach the mansion, Jiang Shining the ghost had no trouble reaching the mansion's door.

However, before he could get in, the entire building had been unceremoniously hauled over by Xuanmin—and before he could transform back into a paper figure, he had come face-to-face with Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen, and Xingzi.

“Good heavens, J-Jiang… Little Jiang-shaoye?” Uncle Chen stammered, his words faltering. “You… You’re not… You’re still…”

You’re not dead, are you? he wanted to ask, but the word “dead” felt too ominous to say. *Are you still alive?* also sounded awkward, so he remained tongue-tied, his words jumbled into incoherence.

“I knew it! I knew I wasn’t mistaken!” Xingzi, her eyes watering, tugged at Aunt Chen’s arm. “I really saw little Jiang-shaoye knocking on the door… But, but, Young Master, you…”

In the face of their bewildered gazes, Jiang Shining clasped his hands in a polite gesture. “I apologize for startling you earlier when I knocked on the door, Miss Xingzi.”

“But you’re now…”

“Alas, I am but a wandering ghost,” Jiang Shining replied with a bitter smile. “Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen, it’s been a long time. Thank you for your concern.”

At the mention of the phrase “wandering ghost,” the people in the carriage fell silent, unsure of how to respond. The current situation wasn’t exactly conducive to catching up.

Xue Xian read aloud the plaque hanging on the mansion’s gate. “Xu Residence…”

“Xu?” Uncle Chen said. “Could this be the residence of the benevolent Lord Xu?”

“The benevolent Lord Xu? Who’s that?” Xue Xian asked.

“In Wen Village, most families share the surname Wen,” Uncle Chen explained. “Fewer than ten households moved in later. Among them was a

merchant named Xu. It's said that he used to be a cloth merchant who owned his own fabric shop. Over the decades, he amassed quite a fortune. He later sold his shop after some family misfortune and moved his wife and children to Wen Village, his wife's hometown. He's been living here for about fifteen or sixteen years. He's a kindhearted man, and with his wealth, he's helped many in the village, earning him the nickname 'the benevolent Lord Xu.'"

Hearing this, Xue Xian halted before he could rudely slam the door open. Instead, he flicked his sleeve, summoning a gust of wind that slipped through the rusted door hinges and gently pushed the weathered gate open. The wooden door creaked with an ancient, groaning sound, and from the eastern room came a series of startled gasps.

The open gate revealed a figure in the hall, who had been about to push open the door to the eastern room. He froze and raised a hand to shield his eyes, seeming unable to bear even the faintest sliver of daylight streaming in from outside.

The light was too dim to clearly illuminate the man's features and only outlined his profile. His shoulders were no longer straight, suggesting he was an advanced age, probably his fifties. He was of average height, and his knees seemed unsteady and slightly bent, as if his legs weren't quite up to the task.

It took him a moment to adjust to the light. He lowered his hand, still hidden in the shadows.

"Why are you guests standing at my door? Is there something you need?" he asked. "Today is my birthday, and all who come are welcome. If you don't mind, please come in and have a drink."

The group was momentarily stunned. This really was the benevolent Lord Xu.

Before they could respond, he added, “I have some old friends who have traveled from afar to celebrate with me. They are one of the most famous opera troupes from Anqing, known for their precise rhythms and captivating performances. You should stay awhile and enjoy the show. Every time they come, Wen Village lights up, and everyone loves it.”

An opera troupe? Xue Xian and Xuanmin exchanged glances, both recalling the group they had encountered on the road.

However, before they could dwell on it further, the scene before them began to change.

Lord Xu’s words seemed to have opened some invisible door. The dilapidated Xu residence suddenly lit up with red lanterns, and the entire deserted village came alive with the sounds of people. Hundreds of shadowy figures emerged from the thick fog, moving toward them, their forms indistinct and nigh endless. At the same time, from the end of the mountain path not far away, the sound of approaching hoofbeats grew loud.

The group turned and saw a caravan gradually taking shape in the morning mist, traveling along the village road in front of Wen Village’s stele. Three carriages led the way, followed by a donkey cart, with only the lead carriage having a driver. The man driving was tall and burly, with three prominent scars on his face that gave him a fierce, unkind appearance. However, Jiang Shining and the others knew that this man’s intimidating looks concealed his true nature: He was actually quite warmhearted.

If he’d still been alive, he would undoubtedly have been considered a good man.

They were none other than the scar-faced man and his group, who had briefly given Xue Xian and the others a ride at Guanyin Crossing.

“They’re still here?” Jiang Shining muttered in surprise.

As a genuine wandering ghost, Jiang Shining knew all too well how much spirits feared the collision of yin energy and yang energy. Few ghosts or lonely spirits would choose to roam about in broad daylight. Even Jiang Shining, who had a paper body for protection and the support of Xue Xian and Xuanmin, only dared to move around on cloudy days or during dawn and dusk.

Yet this long-deceased opera troupe showed no such caution. Because they didn’t know they were dead, they lacked any sense of vigilance or self-awareness. It was unclear how many streets crowded with living people they had passed through on their journey. For ordinary ghosts, such exposure would have long since caused them to disintegrate and vanish due to the effects of yang energy. Somehow, they had arrived here completely unscathed.

“You think they’re just like you?” Xue Xian glanced at the bookworm. “I only said they were already dead…but I never said they were your kind, did I?”

Jiang Shining looked puzzled. “They’re not?”

“If I told you that you’re dead eight hundred times, would you disappear?” Xue Xian snapped.

“You may not have said it eight hundred times, but you’ve definitely said it eighty,” Jiang Shining replied woodenly.

“And yet you’re still bouncing around quite happily, aren’t you?”

Jiang Shining was still confused. “If they’re not ghosts, then what are they?”

“They are attachments,” Xuanmin interjected.

“What are ‘attachments’?” Jiang Shining had never heard of such a thing.

Attachments were neither ghosts nor resentful spirits. They were more like memories, born from unfulfilled promises or deep-seated obsessions that lingered even in death, overshadowing all else. They were so consumed by their attachments that they didn’t realize they were dead. They remembered only that they had promises to keep or appointments to fulfill.

“It’s like owing a mountain of debt, dying before you can repay it, and automatically trying anyway,” Xue Xian said lazily. “Meanwhile, *you’re* fixated on the idea that you can’t disappear yet—at least not until you’ve repaid the debt or have settled it completely. You continue to exist regardless of what you know. Understand?”

“What happens to them if the attachment is resolved?”

“Then it’s time to move on.”

Putting aside the status of the opera troupe, they were awkwardly caught between a rock and a hard place in their current situation.

“Both paths are blocked. What about my sister?” Jiang Shining asked. “How do we get out of here?”

“Who said anything about leaving?”

“We’re not leaving?!” Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen shook like leaves as they stared at the villagers approaching the Xu residence. Were they

supposed to stay and become someone's dinner?!

"Some invitations can't be refused," Xue Xian said, wagging a finger. "These things wandering around the deserted village have their limits. As long as they stay within their boundaries, they're normal. But once they step out of those boundaries, things get complicated. Think about it. If a friendly person invites you to their home for a drink and you refuse, what happens?"

At best, you'd have to explain yourself over and over. At worst, there might be some physical coercion involved. Among the living, this wasn't so big a deal—someone would eventually give in. Not so with the dead. What if they got impatient while tugging at their guests? What if they accidentally stepped out of their boundaries in the struggle? There were too many variables to consider.

However, Xue Xian had other reasons not to leave immediately. If he really wanted out, not even the heavens could stop him. He didn't mind staying a while longer because he sensed something unusual about this place. Perhaps he could find another piece of dragon bone here.

While the group stood around talking, the scar-faced man had already pulled on the reins and stopped the carriage. He jumped down and, upon seeing Xue Xian and the others, had a moment of shock. He clasped his hands and walked over, frowning slightly. "What are you doing here?"

If ordinary people ran into acquaintances on the road, they might find it quite coincidental, express surprise, and exchange a few pleasantries. They would offer some polite greetings, at least. But the scar-faced man didn't follow convention. As he looked at Xue Xian's group, his gaze carried a hint of reproach. There were no polite words, and he even seemed

somewhat displeased, a far cry from the warmhearted man they had traveled with earlier.

Not far away, a group of men and women, old and young, began disembarking from the three carriages. Some were unloading equipment from the donkey cart, while others walked toward the scar-faced man.

An elderly woman among them glanced at the Xu residence and back to Xue Xian's group.

"It's freezing out here. Why are you lingering? You should hurry back to the county town."

She was familiar to Xue Xian and the others. During their journey together, she had given Shitou Zhang a hand warmer. By all accounts, she was a kind and gentle soul, so why was she, like the scar-faced man, urging them to leave?

Jiang Shining, sensing he was being subtly driven away for the first time, stood there like a rod, unsure of what to do.

"Ah, Renliang, they are my guests today. Come, let us tie up the horses and go inside for a warm drink to soothe your throats," Lord Xu said cheerfully, waving to the opera troupe members who had disembarked from the carriages. "Everyone, come in."

With those words, he reached out to pull Xue Xian inside.

"Ah, my back is stiff from sitting too long—" Xue Xian grabbed Xuanmin, who was closest to him, and used his shoulder for support as he stretched, conveniently avoiding Lord Xu's hand. His movements seemed entirely natural, almost seamless.

Lord Xu didn't seem to mind. He switched targets and grabbed the nearest person.

Jiang Shining blinked. *Talk about bad luck…*

This was the first time he'd been grabbed by another ghost. The benevolent Lord Xu's hand was as cold as any ghost's, the kind of chill that could pierce a living person to a bone. For Jiang Shining, it felt like nothing.

"What should I call you, young man? I should have prepared some hand warmers. My hands are too cold—I hope I didn't startle you," Lord Xu said (benevolently).

Jiang Shining forced a smile. "Likewise." *Who knows which of us is colder?*

He was reluctantly dragged into the Xu residence by Lord Xu.

Once inside, he had an idea. "Xu-laoye,[3] why don't you go attend to your other guests? I can manage on my own." His eyes flicked toward the closed door of the eastern room while he spoke.

"My apologies, my apologies," Lord Xu said with regret. "There are so many guests today. Please forgive me if I've been neglectful. I'll go greet the neighbors outside. Feel free to look around."

Xuanmin and the others came in as they spoke. Lord Xu paused when he saw Xue Xian. "Young man, are you…unwell?"

Xue Xian patted his legs. "Leg problems. Hard to move around."

The benevolent Lord Xu slapped his forehead. "What a coincidence! I happen to have a two-wheeled chair at home. My elderly mother once had trouble walking, so I had someone make one for her. It's been sitting in a

corner, unused. Since it's just gathering dust, why don't you use it? Carrying you around must be tiring."

"Oh, it's not too tiring," Xue Xian said politely.

Xuanmin, the one actually doing the heavy lifting, stayed conspicuously silent.

Lord Xu was not just paying lip service. A man of his word, he really did have someone bring the two-wheeled chair from a side room to the main hall. Xue Xian noticed that the Xu residence had entirely flat thresholds between areas, likely built that way to accommodate Lord Xu's mother, who had used the chair. This small detail made Xue Xian think that the benevolent Lord Xu's name and reputation were well deserved.

Though called a chair, the two-wheeled chair was essentially a thin backrest and seat with wooden wheels on either side and two handles at the back so servants could push it. Lord Xu had someone clean the chair and even thoughtfully found a cushion to place on the seat.

Xue Xian thanked him, though when he saw the pillow he said, "No need to trouble yourself. I'm not that picky."

"It's no trouble. We always have such cushions on hand. The chair is too hard, and sitting on it for long would be uncomfortable. Besides, the weather is cold and damp—it wouldn't do to catch a chill."

However, Xue Xian had already unceremoniously taken a seat and was ordering Xuanmin to push him around.

"All right, all right. You're quite an interesting young man," Lord Xu said with a laugh. He clasped his hands in parting and went out to greet his neighbors.

Once Lord Xu's figure disappeared around the corner, Xue Xian didn't wait another second to shove open the door to the eastern room.

Inside, the beggars were huddled around an almost-dry clay pot. They had been frightened by the laughter outside, which they had mistaken for some kind of ghostly gathering. When Xue Xian suddenly pushed the door open and rolled in, the beggars were scared out of their wits. The two most timid among them fainted on the spot with a thud.

"Well, that's quite the welcome," Xue Xian said, completely unrepentant—even teasing them.

Sensing that Xue Xian might scare the entire room into fainting, Xuanmin promptly maneuvered him into a corner of the room. The monk then drew a circle around him, pulled out a paper talisman, and slapped it onto the evil spirit's forehead.

Xue Xian was flummoxed. *What, are we dealing with zombies now?*

"Hey, bald donkey, why are you so petty?! I just touched your head! It's not like I *teased* you or anything. Was that really necessary?"

He rolled his eyes from the position he was stuck in, facing the wall. He was about to say more when he felt something cold in his hand. He watched Xuanmin place the string of copper coins in his palm.

"This is the most spiritually rich spot in the deserted village. Focus on nourishing your bones." With that, Xuanmin patted the back of Xue Xian's head and walked away.

Xue Xian stared at the copper coins in his hand, momentarily stunned.

“Where are you even going?” Xue Xian wanted to turn to see, but the talisman on his forehead kept him from moving his neck.

The two masters’ self-absorbed actions left the room full of beggars at a loss. Even Jiang Shijing and Fang Cheng didn’t have a clue what they had just witnessed. As they stood in a daze, Uncle Chen and Aunt Chen sneaked into the room, followed closely by Xingzi, who rushed over to Jiang Shijing as soon as she saw her.

“Young Mistress!”

Seeing that the two were unharmed aside from being a bit disheveled, Uncle Chen exclaimed: “Young Master, Young Mistress, you scared me half to death!” He glared at the beggars and hurried to shield Fang Cheng and his wife. “Yu’e and Xingzi were crying the whole the way.”

Jiang Shijing gently reassured them they were all right while Xingzi untied the couple’s bindings. The beggars, who hadn’t really intended to harm them and were now scared out of their wits, didn’t lift a finger to stop her. The couple soon removed the ropes and stretched their limbs.

Xingzi tossed the ropes aside. “Thank goodness that you’re safe! It wasn’t just me and Aunt Chen—even little Jiang-shaoye’s eyes were red earlier. He was clearly worried sick.”

“Young Master…Jiang?” Jiang Shijing froze, looking as if she’d seen a ghost. She grabbed Xingzi. “What did you say? Little Jiang-shaoye? Which Jiang-shaoye?”

Before Xingzi could answer, a gentle, nasal voice spoke up. “Jie,[4] it’s me…”

Jiang Shijing fell silent. Her fingers on Xingzi's arm wavered. Hearing that word was enough to bring tears to her eyes, blurring her vision. For a moment, she was so lost she couldn't process why her vision had suddenly grown so blurry. She blinked hard, her eyes darting without settling.

"A-Ning? Is that you, A-Ning?" Jiang Shijing's eyes welled up as she repeated her brother's nickname, and two large tears rolled down her cheeks. "Y-you're not hiding, are you? I can't see you…"

Before her vision could clear, fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

"I was afraid that standing in front of you directly would startle you," Jiang Shining said softly. He had trailed behind the group into the room and was now standing in an inconspicuous corner, partially hidden by a bedpost.

Jiang Shijing's tears cascaded down her face. "How would you—" She had barely spoken a few words before a heavy sob escaped her. "How would you ever startle me? No matter what you look like, you could never startle me. Your sister isn't afraid. Come out. Don't hide…"

Before she could finish speaking, she felt someone pull her into an embrace. The person holding her was thin and frail, his embrace not as broad or sturdy as she remembered. Nevertheless, it was familiar—the same embrace she had known since childhood. Whenever she'd been wronged or suffered, her brother, three years her junior, would come to comfort her. He would tell her amusing stories from books or recount his own embarrassing mishaps until she couldn't help laughing. From a small child who could only cling to her arm, he had grown taller than her, tall enough to envelop her completely in a hug.

Yet Jiang Shining's embrace was now devoid of warmth and chilled her to the core. He had held her on instinct, but he remembered that he no longer had the body heat of a living person when he felt her shiver. In this freezing weather, holding her would only make her colder. Embarrassed, he let go and took a step back.

"Why are you so cold?" Jiang Shijing sobbed, refusing to let him move too far away. She rubbed his hands between hers, blowing on them to warm them up. No matter how long she held them, they remained icy. Her tears fell even faster.

Jiang Shining blinked up at the ceiling, taking a moment to compose himself before looking back at her. "Jie, don't bother. I'm not cold."

Jiang Shijing's tears seemed endless, falling in large drops onto Jiang Shining's hands. She continued to rub at him, her fingers unsteady as she tried to wipe away the tears, only to find that they had soaked into his skin.

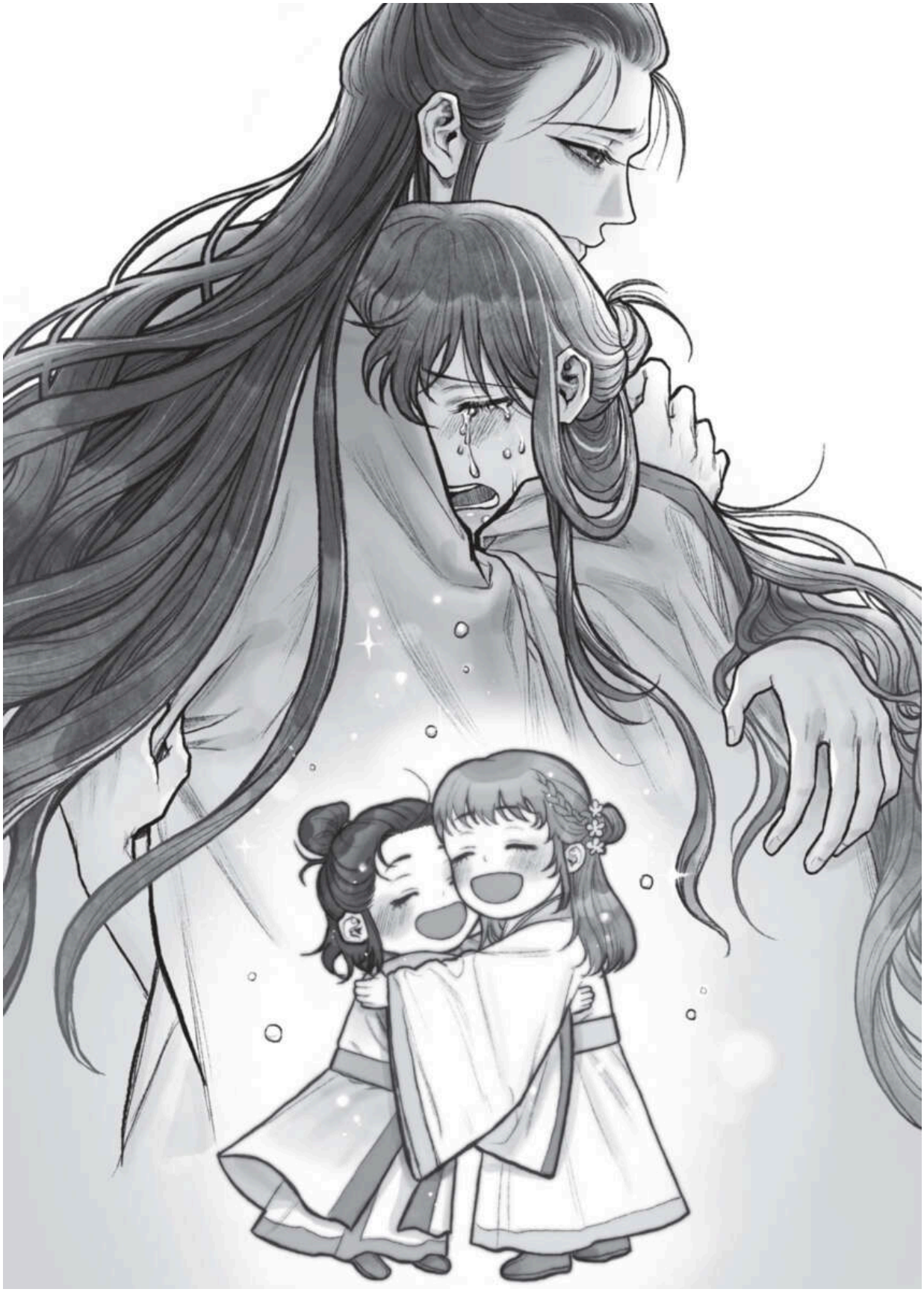
In moments of intense emotion, people often lose control of their strength. Jiang Shining's hands, already damp from his sister's tears, were somewhat fragile. Her vigorous rubbing caused the skin around his fingers to fray. Still, he didn't want to pull his hands away too soon. His sister deserved to release the pent-up emotions she'd been holding back for years. It would be worth it, even if it meant losing a few fingers.

Then again, if his fingers really did fall off, that might frighten her. Reluctantly, he blinked away the moisture in his eyes and looked at Fang Cheng. "Jiefu,[5] she's crying enough to wash my robes. Can you stop her?"

Fang Cheng was also startled when saw Jiang Shining; this was followed by a flood of emotions. He hadn't watched Jiang Shining grow up like his wife had, but in his childhood he had looked after her little brother a

few times. As teenagers, he and Jiang Shining had gone into the mountains to gather herbs together. When he married Jiang Shijing, it was Jiang Shining who had carried his A-Ying to the bridal sedan. Never had he imagined that their next meeting would be separated by life and death.

He understood his wife's feelings all too well, so he had been standing quietly to the side, not interrupting. Only when Jiang Shining spoke to him did he nod with red-rimmed eyes and pull Jiang Shijing into his arms.



“If you keep crying like this, he won’t be able to talk,” he said gently.

“That’s right, Jie. I was only able to come here and see you because of the help of some kind people,” Jiang Shining said. What if her incessant crying hurt her eyes? He exchanged a meaningful glance with Fang Cheng and quickly changed the subject. It was just like when they were teenagers, working together to cheer up Jiang Shijing.

“Kind people?” Fang Cheng held his wife and rocked her back and forth, comforting her. “A-Ning, where are these kind people? Your sister and I should thank them properly.”

Having listened to the entire tearful reunion from his corner, Xue Xian let out a dry laugh. “No need for thanks! Just do me a favor and remove this damn talisman.”

Jiang Shining had almost forgotten that a certain “kind person” was being punished with a time-out in the corner.

Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing looked at Xue Xian in bewilderment, then at Jiang Shining.

“What did you do to upset the master this time?” Jiang Shining said with a sigh as he walked over. “If I remove the talisman, will I be implicated?”

Xue Xian, still scowling at the wall, snorted. “I don’t know how that bald donkey will treat you if you remove it, but if you just stand there watching and do nothing, I guarantee you’ll regret it for the rest of your life —or afterlife—while clinging to my leg.”

This was the first time Jiang Shijing and Fang Cheng had encountered a kind person with such a…*unique* personality.

“Oh, if that’s the case, then I definitely won’t remove it. After all, once it’s gone, you’ll be free to move,” Jiang Shining said flatly.

“Bookworm, are you rebelling *now* of all times?”

Joking aside, Jiang Shining was softhearted and couldn’t really stand by and do nothing. He got his fill of the sight of the wise one being forced to behave, then reached out and grabbed the talisman on Xue Xian’s forehead.

However, in his carelessness, he used the hand that had been soaked by Jiang Shijing’s tears. And Xuanmin’s talismans were no ordinary talismans; they weren’t easily removed.

So, as Jiang Shining gripped the talisman and pulled downward—his damp hand tore right off.

Xue Xian stared.

Jiang Shining stared.

Neither of them moved.

“A-Ning, why are you standing there motionless?” Jiang Shijing asked.

Jiang Shining immediately stiffened and forced his pained expression off his face. He turned around with a strained smile, hiding the broken hand behind his back. “It’s nothing, I just—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the door to the eastern room slammed open with a loud, unceremonious bang.

Chapter 22:
Qi-Riding Array

THE CONVERSATION INSIDE THE ROOM was abruptly cut off by the sound of the door bursting open. Except for Xue Xian, who was stuck facing the wall, everyone else looked up in surprise at the large group of people pouring in. The leader, a tall and burly man with three long scars on his face, seemed more like a bandit than the beggars on the floor. It was the opera troupe!

The last to enter was Xuanmin, who had gone out earlier. He closed the door behind him, keeping the benevolent Lord Xu and the other guests outside. The faint sounds of greetings and laughter from the hall drifted into the room, distant and surreal, as if muffled by layers of fog and the distance of several streets. An eerie chill descended on the room.

Clearly, Xuanmin had led this group into the room because he had questions to ask. But before he could speak, the scar-faced man fired off a rapid series of questions: “Do you know where this is? How can you be so careless as to linger here?” He eyed the clay pot surrounded by beggars and frowned. “There are plenty of places to shelter from the wind and rain. There are so many abandoned temples around these days. You could have chosen any of them. Why pick this place? You’re risking your lives!”

“Ah! We have the elderly and the sick. They’re too ill to move, let alone climb the mountain,” one of the beggars cried out helplessly.

“Aren’t you locals? Haven’t you *heard* of Wen Village?” The scar-faced man, though angry, kept his voice low. “Don’t you know this place

has been deserted for many years? There's not a single living soul in this area. How dare you stop here? And of all times, why now? Don't you get it? Not a single person out there is human!"

Jiang Shining and Lu Nianqi tried to keep their expressions neutral. This was basically a ghost warning them to watch out for other ghosts.

However, only a few in the room were aware of that. The others were completely clueless and were quite taken aback by the scar-faced man's words.

"We know. Not only do we know, but we've also heard many rumors," one beggar replied. "Like how every year at the end of winter, there are sounds here—talking, coughing, even singing…"

The beggar paused mid-sentence when he noticed a man behind the scar-faced man holding several opera costumes and a long fake beard.

"…Opera singing," the beggar finished, his face turning pale.

At the expressions on everyone's faces, the scar-faced man shook his head.

"We do perform the opera, but it's a different situation…" He glanced at the wooden door, as if looking through it at the people outside, and sighed. "We're originally from this village. We grew up eating the rice and drinking the water here. The benevolent Lord Xu has been good to us. Without him, everyone in our troupe, young and old, would have been reincarnated by now.

"We've wanted to repay his kindness for years, but he lacks for nothing except the opera he loves. Our troupe travels far and wide, making our home wherever we go, but every winter, we return here on Lord Xu's

birthday to perform and make him smile. It's a small gesture, but we've been doing it for ten years now…"

"*Ten* years?" an older beggar interjected. "It's one thing to come and perform while he was alive, but why keep coming after his death?"

"We promised," an elderly woman from the troupe said with a gentle smile. "We promised back then. As long as he comes to listen, we'll perform. He's been here every year, so how could we not come?"

"We're used to it, and we do it willingly. But you're different. The people here don't know you, and we don't know if you'll offend them. After all, there's a boundary between the living and the dead. If you offend them, it might cost you your lives," the scar-faced man said. "I'll try to talk to the benevolent Lord Xu later and explain that you're here by mistake and have other matters to attend to, so you can't stay. Hopefully, they'll let you leave."

Xuanmin had been standing by the window and watching the outside through the torn paper while the scar-faced man spoke. When he was done, the monk frowned.

"Wen Village is surrounded by mountains on three sides, and wind gathers on one side. The bright hall faces the sun, giving it a qi-riding formation. How could there be earthbound spirits here?"

Not just one, but an entire *village* of earthbound spirits. Even if the entire village had become earthbound spirits, they should have dissipated within two or three years, given the village's condition. But now, neither the benevolent Lord Xu nor his neighbors showed any signs of fading. Instead, they seemed as lively as if they had just been rejuvenated.

This could only mean one thing: Something hidden had altered the feng shui array.

Xuanmin's gaze flicked to the back of Xue Xian's head before he turned to the scar-faced man. "Since you were born here, did you ever notice anything strange in the village?"

Before the man could answer, Xuanmin decided that Xue Xian should be the one to explain the specifics. Xuanmin walked to the corner, intending to temporarily remove the paper talisman from Xue Xian's forehead. But as soon as he lowered his gaze, he was met with the sight of Xue Xian's indifferent face—

Not only did the evil spirit have a paper talisman on his forehead, but there was an extra hand stuck to it. Xuanmin had never seen anyone achieve such a feat while still in time-out.

The hand dangled from the talisman, having returned to its paper form after it came off. It fluttered with Xue Xian's exhalations, making the situation both amusing and frustrating. It was clear whose handiwork this was.

Xuanmin glanced at Jiang Shining, who coughed. Still hiding his missing hand from his sister, he offered a dry smile. "I was curious about the master's talisman, so I reached out to touch it…"

No one would believe this. Jiang Shining was known for being proper and respectful. Even if he were curious, he would rather die than remove the talisman without Xuanmin's permission. Moreover, he had seen Xuanmin's talismans many times along the way—what curiosity could he possibly have? Any fool could guess that Jiang Shining had been threatened or coaxed to act by Xue Xian.

Xuanmin didn't react much. He gently removed the paper-thin severed hand and nodded to Jiang Shining. "Lift your wrist."

"Huh?"

Jiang Shining hesitated before he understood. He shifted to block his sister and brother-in-law's view and extended his severed wrist. He was distracted the entire time with fretting that his sister might see, so he didn't process what Xuanmin did to fix him. He only felt a pressure around his wrist. When he looked down, his hand was reattached without a trace of injury, save for a faint bruise at the wrist.

Jiang Shining had gotten off scot-free and reacquired his hand. The high monk was indeed a high monk.

"Thank you, thank you," Jiang Shining repeated as he wiggled his wrist. "Next time…"

Xuanmin eyed Jiang Shining, who immediately shook his head and changed his tone.

"I-I mean, there won't be a next time!"

"Mm," Xuanmin responded indifferently, then turned back to the unfortunate Xue Xian.

"Stop looking at me like that. I've got a mouthful of pulmonary blood ready to spit in your face if you keep lording over me like that," Xue Xian grumbled. He hated when his antics failed. Hearing Jiang Shining's groveling made him even more resentful; he felt like ripping off Xuanmin's head with his bare hands.

Xuanmin had already reached for the talisman, but upon hearing this, he paused. Without a word, he turned and headed for the door. As he turned,

the thin sleeve of his monk's robe fluttered into the air.

Xue Xian, who could only move his fingers, snatched the corner of the sleeve and tugged twice. He squinted, squared his soldiers, and reluctantly put aside his pride.

"Come back, come back. Don't leave. I'll refrain from spitting on you, okay?"

When Xuanmin turned back, he saw the evil spirit shiver and spit in the corner instead.

Xue Xian met Xuanmin's gaze. He defended himself: "What I spat out just now was the blood from my heart."

Xuanmin blinked.

"It's all out now. Your face is safe."

Xue Xian felt like he was going to explode when Xuanmin didn't say anything, but he held back his temper after staring into Xuanmin's handsome face.

Fine, I'll reason with you, he thought. After all, he was still under the talisman's control.

He moved his fingers, tugging Xuanmin's sleeve to pull him closer. He wanted Xuanmin closer so he could speak in a low voice, making it less embarrassing if he had to humble himself. No one else would hear, and as for this bald donkey…Xue Xian had already lost face in front of Xuanmin countless times, so he was beyond caring.

He was about to speak when Xuanmin changed his attitude as fast as a rat that had just eaten poison. He removed the talisman without further ado, then spun Xue Xian's wheelchair to face the others in the room.

“This deserted village might have what you’re looking for. You should be the one to explain.”

Xue Xian suppressed his confusion and spoke seriously to the scar-faced man. “If what I’m looking for was placed here, it would have been within the last six months. Have you been around here or passed through during that time? Have you noticed any changes in the deserted village, like overgrown grass, wild trees, or shifts in the mountains and rivers?”

The scar-faced man shook his head. “Not really. This place has been deserted for a long time. We usually stay in other villages and rarely pass through here. To be honest, during Qingming or the Ghost Festival, we just buy some paper money wherever we are and burn it there. The last time we were here was last winter. There wasn’t anything—”

“I remember!” an old woman behind the scar-faced man interrupted. “Actually, there was something! Leader, do you remember the mountain and the old tree crown we always see when we turn from the mountain path to the village road?”

The scar-faced man paused, then slapped his palm. “Oh, right! Mount Muzhi and that old ginkgo tree! No wonder I felt something was off when we entered the village earlier. The water flowing down Mount Muzhi is gone, the old ginkgo tree’s branches are bent strangely, and something’s off about the shape of Mount Muzhi’s peak. I didn’t get a good look earlier, so I can’t remember exactly how it looked. But…” He frowned at Xue Xian. “There was an earthquake recently. Since this place is near the mountains, it’s not unusual for there to be some changes after a few tremors. Would that count as strange?”

Xue Xian raised an eyebrow. “Of course it counts.” If nothing else, the earthquake itself might have been related to his bones.

“Which mountain is Mount Muzhi?” Xuanmin asked.

The scar-faced man stood by the window and pointed south through the torn paper. “There—see it? That one. Mount Muzhi is named for its shape. Like a thumb.”

Xuanmin nodded before meeting Xue Xian’s gaze.

“I’ll dig up my own bones,” the wise one declared.

Everyone in the room shuddered: What did he mean by his own bones? Since when did normal people have bones buried underground that needed to be dug up?!

“Talk less,” Xuanmin ordered as he picked up the wooden stick he had used to draw a circle around Xue Xian earlier.

Xuanmin swiftly drew three lines on the ground, dividing the room into three sections—one for Jiang Shining and his group, one for the beggars, and one for the opera troupe.

“Stay within these lines, and you’ll be safe,” he told everyone. “If you need to leave, just walk out of the room.”

With that, he nodded and pushed Xue Xian out the door.

The benevolent Lord Xu was extremely quick to act. Spotting the two of them, he thought they were leaving Wen Village and tried to stop them.

Xue Xian was hardly softhearted compared to Jiang Shining. When he turned cold, he was as unyielding as a glacier. However, most of the time, he was nonchalant. Whether he could be reasoned with depended entirely on his mood. For some reason, Lord Xu seemed to strike a chord

with Xue Xian, or maybe he was in a good mood. Either way, he seemed unwilling to reject Lord Xu's hospitality.

"We're not leaving the village," Xue Xian said. "We're just borrowing your wheelchair to look around. We'll return it after we're done, since we still need to give it back to you."

The benevolent Lord Xu felt somewhat reassured by this and smiled like a Buddha.

"You don't need to return the wheelchair. It's just gathering dust here. I'm more than happy if it can be of use to you. But you must come back. After the wine, my old friends from the opera troupe will perform. You can't miss it!"

Xue Xian had put on a serious front in front of the others, since apart from his casual tone, he was a respectable dragon. Once they left the Xu residence and entered the deserted village, though, he quickly forgot about decorum.

He had a wheelchair now! He no longer had to be carried around like a fool. He could go wherever he wanted!

"Earlier, I let you push me because of those ignorant people inside. You can let go now," Xue Xian said to Xuanmin, barely suppressing his excitement. "A small wheelchair is nothing. I can handle it."

Xuanmin gave him a doubtful look but ultimately let go. After all, he knew Xue Xian had been holding back for some time. An evil spirit might go mad if not released, and a person who could rot off his own hand was capable of anything when driven that far.

Nevertheless, the moment Xuanmin let go of the wheelchair's handles, he regretted it. He truly experienced what it meant to let go and lose control.

In the blink of an eye, a strong wind rose from the ground, roaring like a dragon. White fog blurred Xuanmin's vision. When he brushed away the vapor, he found that the man in the wheelchair had disappeared without a trace, already off to who knew where.

This was both expected and unexpected. He hadn't expected Xue Xian to behave, but he hadn't anticipated such chaos either.

Xue Xian used the wind to propel himself, half pushing and half floating the wheelchair forward. However, he had more experience using the wind to carry his large dragon form and rarely used it to move something as small as a chair. As a result, he lost control of his strength and sent the simple wheelchair flying forward at breakneck speed. By the time he realized it, he'd crossed most of Wen Village and was just a stone's throw away from Mount Muzhi.

He slapped the armrest. The wooden wheels, impacted by the force, sank into the mud and brought the chair to an abrupt stop.

"Did I lose the bald donkey?"

Xue Xian had the nerve to mutter this, on top of wondering how to guide Xuanmin back to him. He had the string of copper coins in his hand, which could be shaken to create a sound, but he completely forgot about that. Instead, he took in the thick fog around him and the faint outline of the mountain ahead and had a different idea.

His ideas were often unlike anything normal people might think of. The last time he had an idea, he'd transformed from a dragon to a human in

midair, sending Lu Nianqi and the others plummeting into a lake like dumplings into a pot. What would he imagine this time?

Xuanmin, ghostlike in the fog of the deserted village, scanned the area and followed the faint trace of Xue Xian's presence. Just as he was striding forward, he suddenly heard a mighty dragon's roar.

Surprised, Xuanmin looked up and saw a massive black dragon's head emerge from the dense fog ahead.

"Over here!" the dragon solemnly called out—before it flopped back into the fog, presumably because its lower body lacked the strength to hold it up.

Xue Xian's brief transformation into his dragon form resonated with something in the mountains. The moment he ducked back into the fog, the entire deserted village shivered.

Fucking hell! They buried my bones in mud again!

Feeling the resonance with a missing part of his body was a joyous moment, but Xue Xian still seethed with frustration amid his joy. The idea of scouring mountains and digging through soil just to retrieve his scattered bones was a complex emotion that few in the world could possibly understand. He'd felt the same way when he was beneath Fentou Island, then again in Shitou Zhang's courtyard. And as the saying went, "A first-time stranger is a second-time friend." He was *too* familiar with this feeling.

Xue Xian could no longer sit still, and he wouldn't wait for Xuanmin. Since he'd already pointed the monk in his general direction, heading straight for Mount Muzhi shouldn't lead him astray.

He once again propelled the wheelchair forward at breakneck speed. Soon, he was sitting beside the old ginkgo tree at the foot of Mount Muzhi, its trunk bent in a deep bow. The branches and crowns of most trees would stretch toward the sun, even if their trunks bent and curved. For some reason, this old ginkgo tree was like a person bowed so low that their forehead touched their ankles—its crown practically pointed at the ground. It was a peculiar sight.

Xue Xian had never seen Mount Muzhi up close before, and aside from the fact that there was no longer any water flowing down it, he couldn't discern any other changes. But, looking at the old ginkgo tree, it was clear that its canopy was bent toward the ground because something within it was more alluring than the faint sunlight filtering through the thick fog. To find out where his bone was buried, all he had to do was follow where the old ginkgo's crown pointed.

Xue Xian maneuvered the wheelchair slowly to the muddy ground south of the tree. The patch of mud was about ten feet square, slightly darker in color than the surrounding area, and more saturated with moisture, indicating that the soil there had been loosened at some point.

Whoever had dug here had tried to cover their tracks, but a closer look still revealed the difference. When Xue Xian approached this spot, the ground beneath the mud began to shudder faintly.

Those who had buried the bone had thought that hiding it in this haunted, deserted village would ensure no ordinary person would bother digging it up. They forgot to consider the possibility that the bone's true owner might one day come looking for it.

Xue Xian let out a cold laugh, raised his hand, and curled his fingers into a claw-like shape before clenching his fist.

Deep underground, something pulsed like a living heart. It caused the whole of Mount Muzhi to shake, startling a flock of birds from the wild forest.

The sharp cries of the birds faded into the distance as Xue Xian clenched his hand again.

Bang!

This time, the entire patch of muddy ground was jolted from within, as if it had been plowed.

Bang!

After the third pulse, Xue Xian lost all patience and yanked.

The entire patch of mud collapsed inward, and as something seemed on the verge of breaking free, the surrounding soil began to vibrate, soften, and tilt. The mud caved in, forming a dark, gaping hole. The surrounding earth—including the ground beneath Xue Xian—started to roll and tumble into the abyss, like a whirlpool had formed on flat land and was sucking in everything around it.

In the blink of an eye, the stooped old ginkgo tree was swallowed by the dark abyss. The vortex continued to expand, and the edges of Mount Muzhi crumbled bit by bit, sending rocks tumbling down in the tremors. Even though Xue Xian quickly retreated in his wheelchair, he couldn’t escape its powerful pull.

Clearly, all this turmoil was caused by Xue Xian attempting to retrieve the bone buried underground. It was tied to some kind of array, and

disturbing it had thrown the entire deserted village—and perhaps places beyond—into chaos. The thought of having to endure such constraints just to reclaim what was rightfully his made Xue Xian want to laugh in exasperation.

When he relaxed his pull a little, the shaking of the village and the mountain eased a bit. The sucking of the abyss weakened, the soil stopped collapsing into the abyss as dramatically, and even the shaking of his wheelchair lessened.

He tightened his grip again. The dragon bone stirred, and the entire land quaked violently once more. The vortex in the ground expanded as hungrily as a black hole devouring everything in its path.

Xue Xian's brow furrowed, his expression turning icy. His pale skin, paired with his sudden stern demeanor, gave him an air of aloofness and detachment. Compared to his usual mischievous and unrestrained self, this rare display of seriousness suited his true nature far better.

You stripped me of my bones and tendons, and now you expect me to care about the lives of others? What kind of logic is that?!

Yet, precisely because this situation was unreasonable and unfair, Xue Xian held back a fraction of his strength.

Xue Xian's face was still as cold as a winter storm when someone landed nearby. Though they weren't pressed against his back, he could feel the sudden warmth of their body in the damp, gloomy mist. The sensation was so distinct that his heart skipped a beat before settling back down. The anger and frustration that had been boiling inside him dissipated almost instantly, replaced by a deep, quiet sense of reassurance.

Xuanmin's calm voice sounded behind him. "I'll handle it."

A thin section of white linen brushed past Xue Xian's cheek as a lean hand reached over his shoulder and plucked the string of copper coins from his fingers.

Xue Xian was momentarily stunned when he heard the familiar hum of the coins behind him. A tremendous force pressed down on the surrounding vegetation, rocks, and mountains. The vortex in the ground seemed to be restrained by an invisible hand, slowing its rotation until it finally froze. The soil and rocks stopped collapsing.

Mount Muzhi was firmly held in place.

Xue Xian instinctively tilted his head up to Xuanmin, who gazed down at him placidly.

"I'll hold it steady. You focus on retrieving the bone."

The impending blizzard in Xue Xian's heart was banished by those simple words. He looked back at the bottomless black hole before him, feeling the dragon bone within it stirring in resonance with him. Suddenly, he let out a soft laugh—different from his usual mocking or scornful ones. This one carried no sharp edges; it was a genuine, light chuckle.

He didn't bother with formalities like *Thank you* or *I'm indebted to you*. He just hummed and relaxed. "You've got it steady? I'm pulling it out now—"

He squeezed his fingers hard. This time, he held nothing back.

Though Xuanmin had used immense strength to stabilize the mountain, the ground still rattled. The force beneath the surface shook Xuanmin's hand violently, splitting open a wound in his palm. Yet his

expression remained unchanged, and his fingers holding the copper coins stayed fast.

As Xue Xian exerted more and more force, the hum of the copper coins grew louder, and the surrounding mist seemed to be drawn by some kind of energy. It gathered around the two of them.

Just as the wound on Xuanmin's palm tore wide open, a dragon's roar erupted from within the black hole. A stark white bone broke free from the ground and leaped into Xue Xian's hand. The moment it touched his palm, it melted like wax under fire, seeping into his pale skin and merging into his body. It was as if someone had lit a fire in his palm which then spread through his veins, burning all the way to his heart, up his spine, and into his brain.

For a moment, Xue Xian felt as though his blood and bones were on fire, the heat threatening to burst through his skin. He could feel nothing else, not even where he was or what was happening around him. The only thing he remembered was that Xuanmin, someone he could trust, was by his side.

Sometime later, Xue Xian found something to relieve the scorching heat. He clung to it, letting the coolness soothe him before his boiling mind gradually cleared.

When he opened his eyes, he realized that he had transformed back into his dragon form. Judging by the overturned wheelchair in the grass and the scattered vegetation, the transformation had been rather abrupt…

And the thing that had "relieved the scorching heat" was, unfortunately, Xuanmin himself.

Xue Xian had coiled his dragon body around Xuanmin as much as possible. Not only that, but he was also rubbing his scales against Xuanmin, trying to cool every overheated part of his body against Xuanmin's chilly skin.

What to do? This was a bit embarrassing… A mighty dragon, reduced to acting like a giant, clingy pet. Anyone who knew the desperate situation would realize he was just using Xuanmin to cool down, but those who didn't might think Xue Xian was overly affectionate. The key problem was that no one except *him* actually knew said desperate situation—not even Xuanmin, who was currently wrapped in his coils. With a look of utter resignation on his dragon face, Xue Xian sneaked a glance at Xuanmin.

Even with a massive black dragon wrapped around him, Xuanmin stood as still and calm as ever, his eyes shut, one hand in a mudra and the other gently fiddling with the string of copper coins.

Xue Xian had previously used the spiritual energy of the coins to nourish his bones, so there was now a faint connection between him and the coins, as if a thread linked them together. Whether it was due to the influence of his returned bone or something else, the coins seemed a little different from before. As Xuanmin's thumb rubbed the edge of the coins, Xue Xian could just sense something loosening within them. The surface of the coins also began to gleam with a yellowish sheen, as if they were finally shedding their dull, rusty exteriors…

Xuanmin *had* mentioned that each of the five coins was sealed, and two of the seals had started to loosen. Perhaps, given the right opportunity, those two seals could be broken.

This seemed to be that opportunity.

Since Xuanmin remained unfazed by the dragon coiled around him, Xue Xian's embarrassment vanished. Xuanmin's body temperature was incredibly soothing. Once Xue Xian lost his reason to hesitate, he shamelessly clung to Xuanmin. He was determined to cool down before letting go.

The coins in Xuanmin's hand jingled rhythmically, and with each tremor, Xue Xian felt a strange, tingling sensation spread through his body. Every scale on his dragon form seemed to be opening up, allowing the burning heat beneath his skin to dissipate. Though slightly uncomfortable, this connection with the coins was benefitting him at the moment, so he didn't object.

Click.

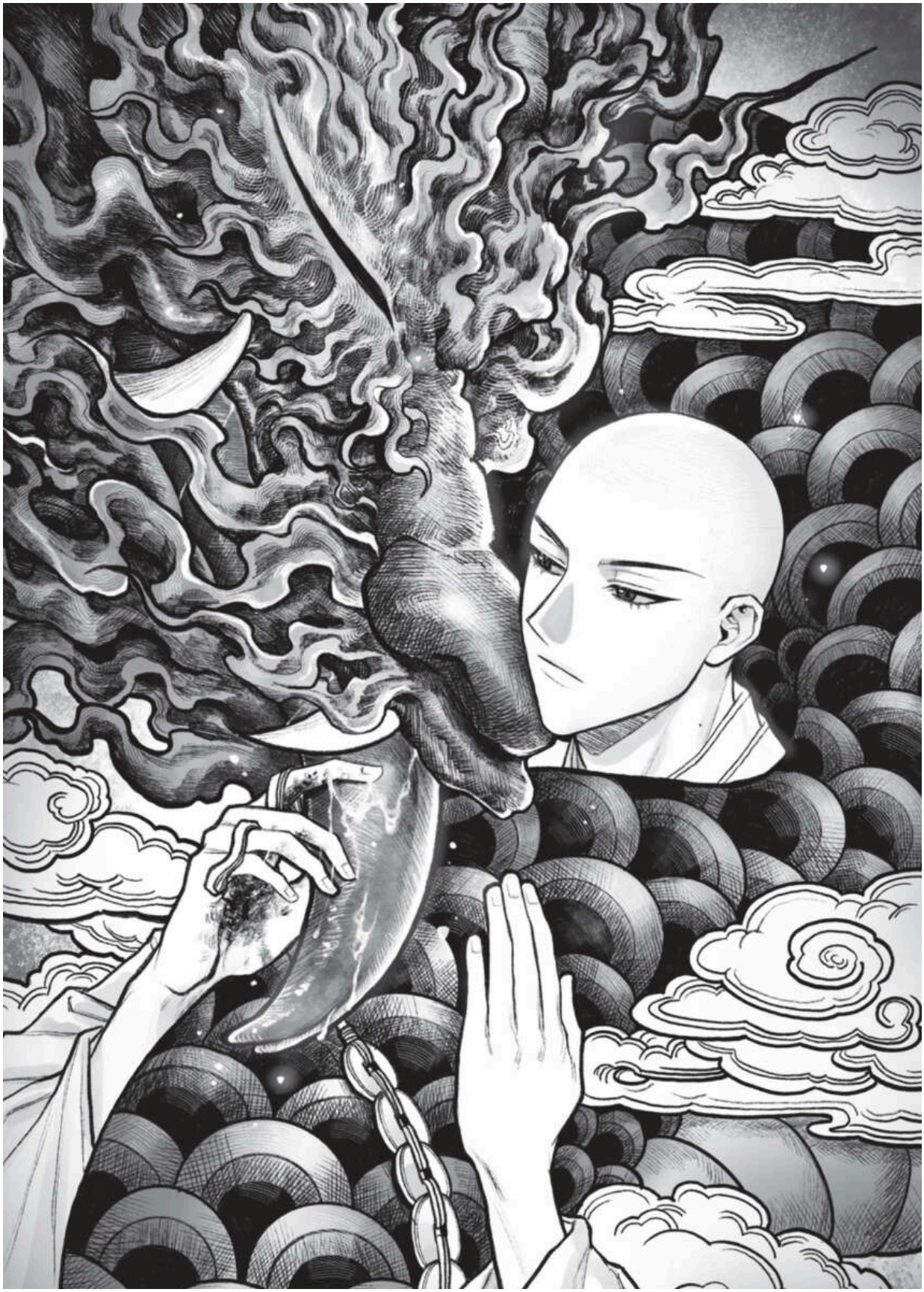
A soft, mechanical sound seemed to echo in his mind. In the midst of alternating waves of heat and cold, Xue Xian drowsily opened his eyes and rubbed his massive body against Xuanmin a couple more times. He lifted his head and drooped it on Xuanmin's shoulder, where he saw that the coins in Xuanmin's hand had changed. Two of them had completely shed their dull exteriors and were now smooth and gleaming, radiating a strong, vibrant spiritual energy.

However, he also noticed a wound on Xuanmin's hand. It ran across his palm, oozing blood that dripped to the ground, joining several existing bloodstains. The wound had been caused by the earlier struggle. For once, Xue Xian felt a twinge of guilt. As a dragon, his entire body was a treasure trove—from his scales to his saliva. Stopping the bleeding would be a simple task.

With his brain still fogged by the heat, Xue Xian lowered his head and licked the wound.

The second the taste of blood touched his tongue, the heat in his mind dissipated. At the same time, Xuanmin's fingers stopped rubbing the coins, and he opened his eyes.

Should I try to explain the situation now, or is my dignity already beyond saving?



Chapter 23:
Old Drumbeat

XUE XIAN HELD STIFF for a long while, his dragon scales bristling. It wasn't until he noticed Xuanmin's wound healing at a speed visible to the naked eye that he snapped out of it.

"See, the bleeding stopped. Don't you think you should thank me?" he asked. As soon as the words left his mouth, he convinced himself that he had a point, and his lost dignity seemed to return, revitalizing him.

It was then that he realized Xuanmin had been standing still for quite some time with his eyes open and a frown on his face. He still had his hand raised in the mudra, and he had neither put away the broken string of copper coins nor glanced at the wound that Xue Xian had licked.

Now that's strange.

Xue Xian stretched his neck to look, but the angle was too high for him to see. To avoid burying Xuanmin alive, Xue Xian had restrained himself when transforming back into his dragon form. Still, his body was massive, even when minimized. After some thought, he tilted his head, lowered his neck, and looked at Xuanmin from an angle almost touching the ground.

From this new perspective, Xuanmin's expression became much clearer. His brows were slightly furrowed, his thin lips pressed together, and although his eyes were open, they were clouded with a layer of black mist, deep and bottomless, that stole any trace of light. His gaze seemed unfocused, as if he hadn't yet awakened from a nightmare.

What startled Xue Xian the most was the visible network of veins on the left side of Xuanmin's neck that resembled an indigo spider web. It stretched from his jawbone down into the collar of his robes. Against Xuanmin's pale skin and his cloudlike white robe, it looked both worrying and strangely menacing. Even someone like Xue Xian, who didn't care about blood or flesh, was at a loss for words. Without a second thought, he raised a claw and hooked it, pulling open the left side of Xuanmin's robes.

Xue Xian hissed at what was revealed.

The weblike veins covered Xuanmin's entire shoulder and extended along the muscle lines of his shoulder blade, reaching deeper into his body.

Xue Xian flipped the robes back with his claw, muttering with a grave expression. "What on earth is this?"

Judging by the way these marks were spreading, it wouldn't be long before they covered half, if not all, of Xuanmin's body, turning him from a revered monk into a demonic one. No matter how Xue Xian looked at it, Xuanmin's condition was not normal. The only question was whether abruptly waking him up would cause any problems.

Xue Xian considered this, then raised a claw and waved it tentatively in front of Xuanmin's eyes. Xuanmin showed no reaction—he didn't even blink. His dark eyes remained shrouded in a thick layer of mist.

Why did the bald donkey open his eyes earlier?

Ah, right. Xue Xian had licked him. But was it because he had stimulated the wound on the skin between his thumb and forefinger, or was it because of his dragon saliva?

After a pause, Xue Xian licked the mostly healed wound on Xuanmin's hand again. Xuanmin's fingers twitched slightly.

Surely I don't have to keep licking until the bald donkey wakes up?! What kind of nonsense is this?!

This was all so absurd. If it hadn't been for the fact that he knew Xuanmin's character—stoic, never playful—he would have suspected that Xuanmin was messing with him.

It was a good thing it was Xuanmin who was in this situation.

If it were anyone else… The thought of having to lick someone else made Xue Xian feel like his brain might explode from disgust. He shuddered violently, squinting at Xuanmin's face. *If you don't open your eyes soon, I'm going to give you a bath.*

Just as Xue Xian bared his teeth, figuring out the best angle to strike, the sinister network of veins under Xuanmin's robes faded like the tide receding from the shore. It disappeared from his arms and shoulders, retreated to his neck, and eventually condensed back into his small mole.

Once those marks vanished, the mist covering Xuanmin's eyes dissipated. His dark eyes, now clear like polished glass, regained their light in a flash. Immediately after, his brows twitched, and his fingers, which had been rubbing the copper coins, tightened. He was truly awake.

He caught a movement out of the corner of his eye.

Instinctively, he turned his head—right on time to come face-to-face with someone who had been plotting to take a bite.

They stared at one another.

"What are you doing?" Xuanmin finally asked.

Xue Xian was stumped. He couldn't very well say he was figuring out how to take a bite, could he? How about *Let me use your head to check if my teeth still work?*

No, that kind of provocative talk was better left unsaid. Xue Xian had no qualms about annoying others, but he had to weigh his words carefully with Xuanmin. After all, in a way, this bald donkey seemed born to keep him in check.

Xue Xian thought of many possible replies. In the end, he said: "Can't I even yawn without you interfering? Wow."

In the past, Xuanmin's cold expression had seemed to say *Do as you please*, but now, it was strangely solemn. Some lingering emotion seemed to cling to him.

"Why are you making such a bitter face? Why weren't you responding earlier, huh? What was with that?" Xue Xian asked.

Xuanmin glanced down at the thin string hanging from his fingers, then rubbed the two copper coins that had shed their rust. He seemed to be thinking as he hung the coin string back on his waist.

"I remembered some things," he said.

"What things?" Xue Xian prodded, though he backed off almost immediately. "Of course, as *usual*, if there's anything you don't want to or can't talk about, you can pretend you don't remember."

Even asking such a simple question was out of character for Xue Xian. Given his usual temperament, other people's affairs were none of his business, especially personal matters. He had no interest in prying into them, whether they were good or bad, bitter or joyful. If others were willing

to talk, he would listen. The amount of attention he paid depended on his mood. If he liked the person, he might tolerate a few extra words; if he didn't, he wouldn't hear a single sentence; and if others didn't want to talk, he would never pry.

Xuanmin was an exception. Xue Xian always felt a tickle of curiosity when it came to the monk's affairs. Back when Xue Xian had interrogated him in the inn, that had been a matter of practicality. After all, his identity and background were related to their situation. Not so this time. There were no other considerations, but Xue Xian still asked because he wanted to hear about Xuanmin's personal memories. It was only after Xue Xian blurted out the question that he remembered Xuanmin's personality—nine times out of ten, he wouldn't speak about such things. Xue Xian had added the second line to give Xuanmin a way out.

Surprisingly, he didn't take the out. He seemed unwilling to maintain his aloof wariness with Xue Xian. He looked up, staring at a fixed point in the distant white mist as if organizing his thoughts.

"Not much, and it's very fragmented," he said after a moment. "It was mostly scenes from my youth, sitting at a desk copying scriptures. But…"

"But what?" Xue Xian asked. Xuanmin's slight hesitation and small grimace suggested he had remembered something unpleasant.

"In two fleeting scenes, I was holding something," Xuanmin said with a trace of disgust.

"What was it?"

"It…looked like human skin."

“What?”

Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian and repeated himself in a low voice. “Human skin, torn into pieces. The largest no bigger than a palm, the smallest smaller than a coin. Two pieces were slightly thicker, and the rest were very thin.”

Xue Xian had imagined many things Xuanmin might have been holding: a wooden fish, paper talismans, books, writing brushes, or even a begging bowl. The answer he’d given was beyond any reasonable expectations.

“Human skin? Are you sure?”

Xuanmin nodded.

“Then… Do you remember the context? Maybe you picked it up.”

But even as he said it, he knew it was unlikely. Human skin wasn’t something you would pick up like it was nothing! If it were lying around everywhere, it would be indicative of a disaster. What if the human skin was directly connected to something Xuanmin did? What kind of *good* deed could be associated with the acquisition of human skin? Although Xuanmin had a different aura from that of ordinary monks, it was hard to imagine him doing anything that violent…

Wait, no. Xue Xian’s memory traced the network of veins that had covered half of Xuanmin’s body earlier—and how, long before they’d become this close, he’d told Jiang Shining that Xuanmin had a chilling ferociousness, like a frosty blade sheathed in a thin layer of plain white cloth, calm and cold but with a sharp, hard edge. When necessary, he might even break the precept against killing…

But that was different from being murderous.

Xue Xian momentarily drifted away on those thoughts. When he came back to the present, he noticed Xuanmin staring at him with an indescribable expression.

Xue Xian took a moment to recover before he asked smoothly, "When was this, anyway? Still in your youth?"

"Mm."

"Are you sure? You don't remember the context, so how do you know it was from your youth?"

Xuanmin spread his palm. "The hands of children look different. Besides, there were copied scriptures on the desk in front of me at the time."

Xue Xian blinked. *Were you trying to piss off Buddha by copying scriptures while holding human skin?*

All jokes aside, Xue Xian found it even harder to imagine a young Xuanmin doing any sort of violent deeds. There had to be more to the story, right?

"Well, instead of making blind assumptions, why not wait until you remember the context?" Xue Xian drawled. "You just broke the seal on the copper coins and remembered some scenes. Maybe if you break another one, you'll remember more. If you break all five, you might fully recover your memory."

There was some logic to this. Both of them were straightforward people and did not want to waste too much energy on fragmented memories.

“Let’s go.” Xuanmin patted Xue Xian’s noble dragon chin with the back of his hand.

Xue Xian was stunned for a moment until he remembered that he was still wrapped around the monk. If he didn’t transform back into human form, Xuanmin couldn’t leave. With a cough, he summoned the wind to pull the wheelchair over, transformed back into human form, dressed himself, and sat back in the chair.

While Xue Xian adjusted his robes and sleeves, Xuanmin stepped forward and dug out a few copper nails and paper talismans from the pit where the dragon bone had been buried. He wrapped these items in a clean cloth and put them away, then stood up and walked back.

There was no way Xuanmin would let Xue Xian wander off after he’d disappeared earlier. Xuanmin gripped the chair’s handles firmly. However, when his gaze fell on the skin between his fingers, he paused. The wound that had been torn open on his hand was almost scabbed over. In a little while, the skin there would be smooth and flawless, as if it had never been injured.

Xue Xian had treated his wound. But was dragon saliva something to be used so casually?

Xue Xian finished adjusting his robes and, seeing that Xuanmin hadn’t moved, couldn’t help saying: “Why are you still standing there?”

To his surprise, Xuanmin raised his injured hand. “Do you know the effects of dragon saliva?”

His expression was still calm and indifferent, but his tone was uneven, as if his emotions were divided.

This bald donkey really knows how to hit a sore spot! Xue Xian's mouth twitched. The self-justification he'd made earlier suddenly lost its effect. Now that he was back in human form, thinking about what he had done was…quite something.

Oh no.

But Xue Xian kept a straight face, determined to argue even if he had no grounds.

"Why would I need to know the specific effects of something from my own body? Knowing that it's useful is enough. Why bother with the details? It's not like I'm going to chop myself up for medicine. Do I look crazy?" He snorted and tapped the armrest of the chair impatiently. "I treated your wound, and instead of thanking me, you're spouting nonsense. Let's go!"

His intention was to bluff with an authoritative and unassailable tone to prevent Xuanmin from overthinking about the whole "licking the wound" thing. Sure enough, when he peeked at Xuanmin out of the corner of his eye, the monk shook his head and lowered his injured hand.

"Let's go," Xuanmin said with a hint of resignation. Clearly, he had no intention of pressing the topic. Xue Xian was quite satisfied.

The two returned to the residence of the benevolent Lord Xu without delay. They deliberately avoided the main entrance and stole into the courtyard from the side entrance.

The front hall, which had previously been receiving guests, was now empty. The clinking of cups and the sound of laughter and conversation drifted from the back hall, still muffled as if through a thick fog.

Jiang Shining let out a long sigh of relief as soon as Xue Xian and Xuanmin entered the east room. “You’re finally back…”

With those two gone, there hadn’t been anyone dependable left in the room. If the benevolent Lord Xu and his people suddenly went wild, there would be no stopping them.

“Oh, why do you look so scared?” Xue Xian asked in a mocking voice. “If you don’t go out and show off, the benevolent Lord Xu won’t come in. Unless he’s unlucky enough to need something from the east room.”

At this, the others in the room stirred and looked curious.

“If we don’t go out, he won’t come in? Are you sure?” Jiang Shining said. “By the way, I heard a faint commotion outside earlier, as if they were preparing wine and tea. The sounds seemed to be heading toward the back. It’s like they’ve completely forgotten about us in the east room.”

Xue Xian waved his hand. “It’s natural they wouldn’t remember…”

Earthbound spirits were not living people. They had strong impressions of the faces and events they constantly saw but reacted sluggishly to intruders. For example, when Lord Xu and his people noticed Xue Xian and his group, they engaged in normal small talk and even seemed *too* hospitable. However, if they lost sight of Xue Xian and his group, they would quickly forget about the intruders, as if they had never been there. That was why they could stay in the east room for so long without anyone checking on them. But as soon as they left the room, the benevolent Lord Xu’s enthusiasm would reignite.

“I see!” The scar-faced man and the others nodded with

enlightenment.

The former was about to say something when Xue Xian pointed at him. “But I’m not talking about *you*. ‘Intruders’ only refers to us. You’ve come here every year, from the time the benevolent Lord Xu was alive until after his death. To the people in the back hall, you’re somewhere in between, not intruders. They’ve temporarily forgotten about you, but they’ll come looking for you soon.”

Sure enough, voices could be heard approaching from the back hall.

“Where’s Deliang? My memory is failing me. I actually forgot to greet an old friend. My apologies…” Lord Xu was talking to someone, and his voice drew closer and closer to the east room’s door.

Knock, knock, knock.

The people in the room started.

“Deliang, are you in there?” Lord Xu’s voice came from behind the door. “The banquet is ready. We’ve saved seats for you—”

Creak!

The old door made a sharp noise at the slightest movement.

“We’re here, we’re here!” The scar-faced man and the others spun around before the door was pushed open. They formed a cluster that blocked Lord Xu’s line of sight. “We were just resting here. We’ll be right there.”

From the perspective of the others, only their backs were visible. The benevolent Lord Xu’s cheerful voice came through this wall: “Come now, you must be hungry after such a long journey. Let’s go!”

The scar-faced man chuckled deeply and agreed. Then, one by one, the members of the opera troupe left the room and followed the benevolent Lord Xu toward the back hall.

The scar-faced man lingered by the east room's door before he left. "You should leave while you can. Once the opera starts, we can't help you. It'll be hard to get away."

Xue Xian had already planned to do so, and now was the perfect opportunity since the scar-faced man and the others had drawn the benevolent Lord Xu away. The people in the room all stood up, except for the beggar with the severed hands, who hesitated.

"Didn't you ask us to save them?" Jiang Shining pointed to the old man and the two children lying unconscious on the bed. "Let's take them back to the pharmacy. Be careful. Use clothes to cover their wounds."

The beggars exchanged glances but agreed without further hesitation. They wrapped up the three who were covered with sores and carried them on their backs as they walked with the others.

Xuanmin gripped Xue Xian's wheelchair and strode out. Ahead of them, the scar-faced man suddenly turned around.

"I can tell you two are capable people. I could sense some changes and movements in Wen Village earlier…" He looked toward the door that led to the back hall. The laughter and conversations of people who had been dead for years floated through the air between them. "Forgive me for asking, but are they about to dissipate?"

Xuanmin hummed in agreement. "The array that disrupted the energy flow has been broken. The spirits won't be trapped here anymore."

“They’ll probably last until nightfall, no more,” Xue Xian added, his eyes on the sky outside.

To Jiang Shining and the other intruders, the earthbound spirits were a potential danger that was best avoided. No matter how hospitable and harmless they seemed, they couldn’t be trusted, only pitied. But for the scar-faced man and his group, they were familiar relatives and neighbors. Each face, gesture, and laugh evoked a string of memories…

The scar-faced man nodded, his face a mix of emotions. After a long pause, he nodded again. “That’s fine.”

Xue Xian was unusually well-behaved on the way back. He didn’t summon thunderclouds or rain, nor did he transform into his true dragon form. He didn’t even send the carriage flying into the sky. The only trick he pulled was expanding the interior of the carriage a little. He also summoned a gust to push the horse along, which sped up the journey considerably.

Jiang Shining, unaccustomed to Xue Xian’s lack of mischief, scrutinized him throughout the trip.

“What are you pondering so seriously?” Jiang Shining finally asked.

Xue Xian glanced at him one time, then again. He clicked his tongue.

“I guess you could be considered a half-baked physician, huh?” Xue Xian muttered.

Can’t you ever *say anything nice?* Jiang Shining wondered. He decided to look somewhere else.

That didn’t last long, as Xue Xian yanked Jiang Shining closer. “Tell me, do you know what dragon saliva is used for?”

Jiang Shining gave Xue Xian a strange look, as if he were a pervert.

“Hey, what’s with that look? I’m asking you a question.”

“It’s just… It’s a bit hard to say anything when a dragon asks some human about the uses of dragon saliva,” Jiang Shining replied slowly. “Don’t you know yourself?”

Xue Xian rolled his eyes. “Do you spend your free time researching whether your own eyeballs can be used as medicine and what effects they might have? It’s not like it’d have any effect on me anyway.”

“That’s true…” Jiang Shining muttered.

“Besides, I can test things on others a couple of times and get a rough idea of the effects. But where am I supposed to test dragon saliva?”

“It’s probably best not to test it at all,” Jiang Shining warned.

“Why?”

Jiang Shining had initially kept his voice low, but after a few sentences, he subconsciously returned to his normal volume. “I’ve never seen anyone use it myself, but I’ve heard a few rumors. Dragon saliva, well…”

Abruptly, a hand reached over and interrupted Jiang Shining. He looked up in confusion as Xuanmin placed his string of copper coins into Xue Xian’s hand. Next, the monk casually slapped a paper talisman on Xue Xian’s forehead. With one more swift motion, Xuanmin turned Xue Xian, chair and all, to face away from Jiang Shining. He then gave Jiang Shining a placid, silent look.

I’m not sure what I said wrong, but if he’s looking at me like that, it must have been something inappropriate. Jiang Shining smiled tightly at

Xuanmin and shut his mouth. He turned to look out the carriage window instead.

"You bald donkey, just you wait," Xue Xian growled. "Once I tear off this damn talisman, I'm going to beat you to death! Do you know how infuriating a half-finished sentence is?"

Unfortunately, the paper talisman seemed to be stuck on Xue Xian indefinitely. He still couldn't move a muscle by the time they arrived at the Fang residence and settled into one of the side rooms.

Xuanmin chose a corner for Xue Xian, claiming it was rich in spiritual energy and suitable for recuperation. This time, the bald donkey showed some mercy and didn't make him face the wall. But facing the door was equally embarrassing. What was he supposed to say to any visitors? Huh?

Xue Xian continued to fume.

Earlier, while Xue Xian and Xuanmin had gone to dig up the dragon bone, Jiang Shining had explained the whole situation to his sister and brother-in-law. He knew that a drop of her blood was needed to send their parents on their final journey. However, since ghosts couldn't appear in broad daylight, the ritual had to wait until sunset.

Jiang Shijing's parents were of utmost importance to her. So, as soon as the sun dipped below the horizon, she and her brother went to find Xuanmin.

The sky was dim. By evening, lamps lit the room. Xue Xian sat in his corner with his eyes closed. He quietly fiddled with the copper coins as he nurtured his body. The warm, yellowish light cast gentle shadows on him,

giving his pale skin a faint, warm glow. As soon as the Jiang siblings entered the room, they instinctively subdued their movements.

Fortunately, Xuanmin was a man of few words and little preamble. He placed the Jiang family's silver medical bell on the table. From a hidden pouch at his waist, he pulled out a cloth bundle, unfolded it, and took out a silver needle of just the right thickness. He handed it to Jiang Shijing.

"Draw three drops of blood from the Laogong point," Xuanmin instructed.

Jiang Shijing took the needle, heated it over the lamp flame, then pricked the Laogong point on her palm. She handed the needle back to Xuanmin.

"Drip the blood here," Xuanmin said, pointing to three spots on the medical bell. "From west to east."

Jiang Shijing held her breath and squeezed a drop of blood onto each of the three spots.

As soon as the blood droplets landed on the silver bell, they began to move on their own. They filled the grooves of the bell and flowed around it. At certain points, the entire bell would vibrate like it was enduring some kind of impact or torment. The faint buzzing sounds made the Jiang siblings visibly anxious.

Only after the three drops of blood had traversed every groove and crevice of the bell did they finally drip off the edge and onto the table.

First, Xuanmin washed his hands, then he took a brush and wrote the names of the Jiang couple on a piece of yellow paper. He folded the paper three times and placed it on top of the medical bell before he set it alight.

Finally, with the flame from the paper, he lit a long incense stick. The thin wisp of smoke carried a unique fragrance that spread through the room and calmed everyone's minds.

As the incense burned down to its end, no one in the room spoke a word, save for Xuanmin, who softly recited a deep, resonant mantra.

Ding!

The silver medical bell rang with a lingering sound that made the Jiang siblings shudder.

Ding!

It rang again.

"I-is that…Mom and Dad?" Jiang Shijing asked, her tears already dripping onto the table.

"They've been trapped for too long and can no longer manifest physically," Xuanmin said. "They can only communicate through sound to bid you farewell."

After all these steps—the washing of hands, the writing of talismans, the burning of incense, and the reciting of the mantra—the deceased could be sent on their way. The Jiang siblings stared at the medical bell, unable to see their parents' forms but unwilling to blink.

In the corner, Xue Xian opened his eyes. He gazed at a point in the empty space above the table until he closed his eyes in lieu of a nod. This was his way of thanking the kindness of the couple that had spanned over a decade.

The medicine you applied to my wound worked well, and the copper brazier was wonderfully warm against my hand. Thank you, and farewell.

In the courtyard of the Xu residence in Wen Village, the female lead and male lead were singing in a melodious tone, their voices undulating with grace. The gongs and drums accompanied them perfectly.

"From now on, don't let the moon sink below the mountain ridge…"

This same play had been performed for many years, yet no one grew tired of it. The people in the courtyard still loved the lyrics and the performances. Old faces, old homes, old stages—it was as if the past decade had never occurred, and there was no separation between life and death.

The benevolent Lord Xu sat at the table, sipping tea and watching the comings and goings on the stage. His fingers tapped on the table in time with the gentle melodies. After savoring the performance for a long while, he spoke softly.

"Deliang, you've worked hard…"

As the troupe leader, the scar-faced man didn't need to perform; he was at the same table as Lord Xu. He was momentarily stunned upon hearing this and turned to see Lord Xu smiling at him, a smile filled with meaning—as if he already knew that the deserted village was no more, and that his old friends were gone.

Deliang was silent for a time.

Eventually, he picked up his untouched cup of tea and tipped it toward the benevolent Lord Xu before taking a sip.

"Next year, we might…not be able to come ourselves."

His expression, too, carried many unspoken words.

After finishing their tea, the two men exchanged one more smile. They had fulfilled a timeless promise and were now bidding each other a

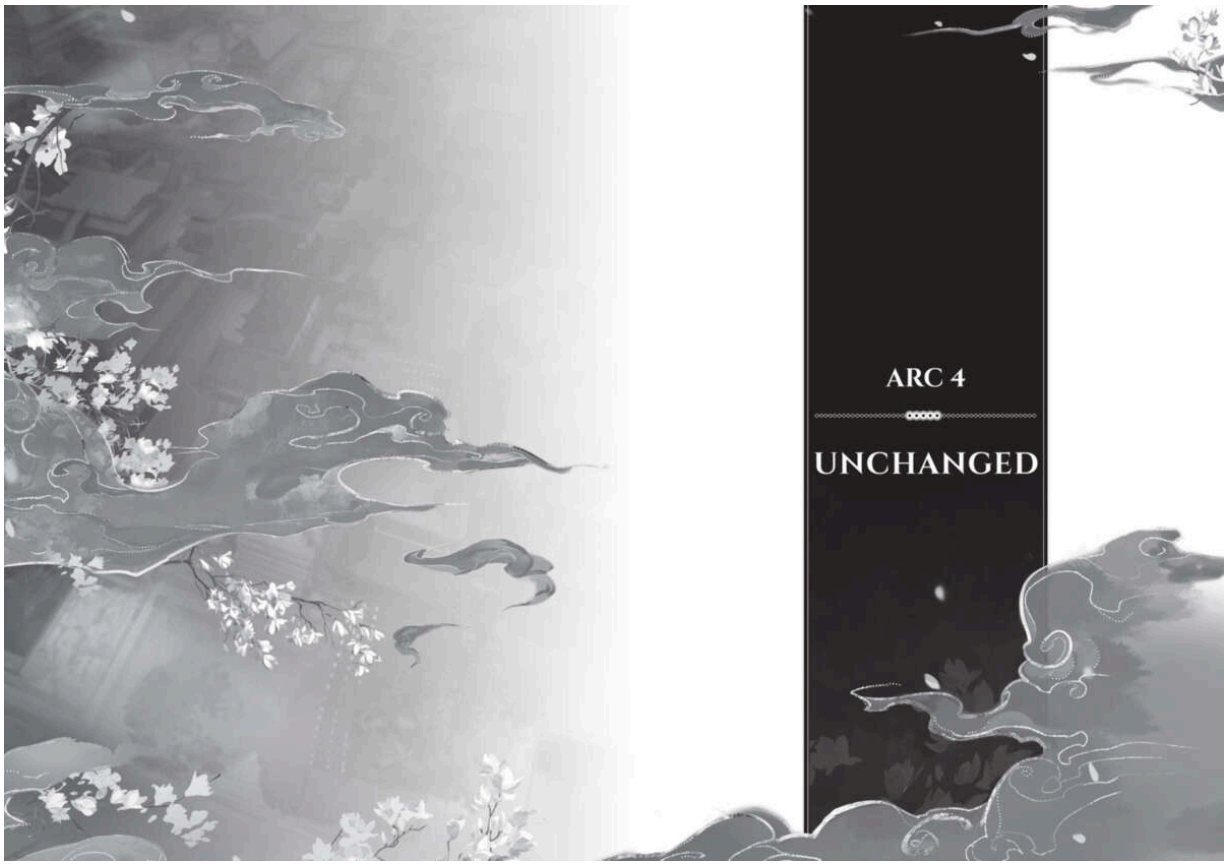
silent farewell.

It's time for you to go, and me as well…

The sky darkened completely. Slowly, the perpetual fog of the deserted village began to disperse. Like the thick mist, the faint sounds of the opera faded and drifted away.

"Let not the moon sink below the mountain ridge; no more shall it dim, no more shall people age; for a hundred years should pass like this night…"

If you come to listen, I will come to sing. A promise worth a thousand pieces of gold, regardless of life or death.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Chapter 24:
Bone-Dwelling Threads

THE FANG HOUSEHOLD CONSISTED of around a dozen people. The old master and mistress had passed away, and now the family was managed by Fang Cheng and his wife, Jiang Shijing. Uncle Chen served as the steward, while Aunt Chen was both the housekeeper and the cook.

The couple had a pair of twin sons who managed the front of the herbal shop, handling prescriptions and bookkeeping. However, the account books were always reviewed by Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing at night.

Xingzi, who had lost her parents at a young age, had been taken in by the late master and mistress of the Fang family. Since Jiang Shijing married into the family, Xingzi had been her personal maid. Though nominally a servant, she had learned a great deal about medicine and healing from Jiang Shijing and could be a valuable assistant in critical moments.

The rest of the household were helpers who took care of miscellaneous tasks, such as gathering and drying herbs. There were also a few young apprentices sent by other families. However, the helpers were not always around, since they often traveled far to collect herbs and might be gone for many days. The young apprentices did not come every day either; they were mostly from poor families and had to help with household chores in addition to learning their craft. Thus, the bustle of the Fang family's herbal shop was usually concentrated in the front, while the back courtyard was relatively quiet.

That night, however, the back courtyard of the Fang family's herbal shop was perhaps the liveliest it had ever been. The beggars that Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing had brought back had cleaned themselves up and reluctantly changed into the padded jackets provided by Uncle and Aunt Chen. Though the jackets were not new, they were clean and intact, without any holes or loose padding.

The Fang family's long-standing friendship with the Jiang family, and their eventual union through marriage, was not without reason. Everyone in the household shared a tendency to worry about others.

Aunt Chen clicked her tongue at the sight of the beggars' frostbitten hands and feet. Without a word, she dug out some spare hand warmers, filled them with charcoal, and handed them to the beggars.

"Here, warm yourselves. Look at how frostbitten you are… Hey! Don't scratch! I know it itches, but don't scratch it. Frostbite always itches when it starts to thaw. Stay here and warm yourselves for a while. I'll go get some medicine for you."

These beggars were not lazy by nature. They had been forced into their current situation due to famine in their hometowns and physical disabilities. Regardless, they had kidnapped people, which was inexcusable. Most people would have let them go without further ado, but the Fang family did not. Not only did they forgive the beggars, but they also treated them as guests and offered to heal their ailments. It was truly an act of returning good for evil.

After being settled in by Aunt Chen, the beggars were overwhelmed with guilt. Their earlier bravado in the wilderness had completely dissipated.

“D-don’t trouble yourself,” several of them stuttered. “We’re used to the cold. This frostbite isn’t new. Just leave it be.”

Perhaps it was because she was in her own home, but Aunt Chen’s authority seemed to grow. She glared at them. “Are you the one with the injuries, or am I? Do you know medicine, or do I? Keep warming yourselves! Don’t let go of those hand warmers. I’ll be back soon.”

The twin children of Aunt and Uncle Chen, who happened to be passing by, recalled their childhood scoldings when they heard their mother’s tone. They instinctively ducked their heads and tried to slip away, but before they could turn around, Aunt Chen called out to them.

“Where are you two running off to? Is there a ghost chasing you? Come here.”

The brothers, Xiu Ping and Xiu An, awkwardly spun around and forced smiles onto their faces. When they spoke, it was in unison.

“What is it, Mom? We just closed the shop and need to deliver the account books to Young Master Fang.”

“How big are those account books? Do you need two people to carry them?” She pointed at one of them. “You, go get a cup of strong liquor and some gauze.”

Xiu An, the younger brother, muttered, “Strong liquor? What for? Did Dad upset you?”

Meanwhile, his older brother grabbed the account books and made a quick escape.

“Like your father has the guts.” Aunt Chen pointed at the beggars in the room. “Everyone here has frostbite. I need to treat them.”

At the mention of frostbite, Xiu An's face turned a bit green. As a child, he had been quite mischievous and had often picked fights with Xiu Ping. One snowy day, the two went out to play in the snow, but they ended up fighting as usual. They were covered in snow from head to toe. Xiu An, with his reckless determination, buried his brother up to his neck in snow.

In the end, not only had his hands frozen red, he'd also received a spanking from his mother that had left his backside swollen for days. His brother laughed at him for a month.

Soon after that, neither brother had much to laugh about. Once again, they played in the snow for too long. Upon returning home, they soaked their numb hands and feet in hot water without a second thought. The sudden shift from cold to hot caused frostbite to develop on their fingers and heels, which swelled up like radishes. The itching was hellish—almost unbearable.

Aunt Chen had chopped up ginger, extracted its spicy juice, mixed it with strong liquor, and applied it to the frostbite. Xiu Ping was fine, just swollen, but Xiu An's skin cracked in a few spots. The pain made him cry, snot and all. His brother laughed at him for another month. That experience was so unforgettable that, even now, Xiu An couldn't help grimacing at the thought of it.

While Aunt Chen wasn't looking, he gestured to the beggars in the room. "Good luck."

Frostbite was common in the cold and damp winters of Qingping. Some people tried to reduce the swelling at home, while others came to the herbal shop for remedies. Aunt Chen had dealt with many such cases and

was skilled at it. She quickly followed the same steps she had with Xiu An, then used gauze to apply the mixture to the beggars' frostbitten skin.

"This is good. It might hurt if there are cracks, but it works fast," Aunt Chen said as she applied the treatment. The beggar, however, was already tearing up from the pain.

Thus was this group of once-defiant individuals tamed by Aunt Chen in less than a night. They sat with their hands covered in ginger and liquor, tears in their eyes, asking if there was anything they could do to help. Sitting idle was too embarrassing.

While this was going on, Fang Cheng and Jiang Shijing had also gone to work. The entire back courtyard was lively, except for one room, which remained tightly shut and tranquil. This room was occupied by Xuanmin and Xue Xian.

The Fang residence, though not small, was limited in space. The beggars were divided into two rooms, and the sick occupied another. This left only two empty rooms. One was taken by Shitou Zhang, Lu Nianqi, and Jiang Shining (who didn't need to sleep). The last room was for the two wise ones to share.

Since they had shared a room before and neither of them particularly needed sleep, they had no objections. Well, of course Xue Xian, who had been slapped with a talisman and forced to face the wall, had *wanted* to complain, but for some inexplicable reason, he swallowed his protests. Perhaps it was because he had been controlled for so long that it had become a routine. A day without someone controlling him felt strangely uncomfortable.

After performing the rites for the Jiang couple in the evening, Xuanmin had closed the door and begun meditating by the bed.

From the day Xue Xian met him, Xuanmin had never lain down to sleep. At night, he would either sit by the table with his eyes closed or meditate cross-legged by the bed. He always maintained his icy, unshakable demeanor. Even with his eyes closed, he exuded aloofness. Xue Xian was using the copper coins to heal his spine, so he was too preoccupied to cause trouble or make a fuss for Xuanmin. As a result, the room fell into complete silence, so quiet that the Fang family didn't dare disturb them.

Earlier, during dinner, Jiang Shijing and Fang Cheng had come to invite them to eat. They knocked on the door but received no response. For a second, they feared something had happened to the two inside. Jiang Shining, taking advantage of his paper-body form, slipped through the door crack and peeked around.

When he emerged, he waved one hand at his sister and brother-in-law. "Don't bother calling them. If they're hungry, they'll come out on their own."

He didn't fully understand what Xuanmin and Xue Xian were recuperating from, but it seemed profound and not something to be interrupted. Moreover, these two were not ordinary people. Missing a meal or two wasn't a big deal for them.

The Fang family weren't yet familiar with Xue Xian and Xuanmin and only knew that they were extraordinary individuals. Since extraordinary people often had peculiar habits, the Fang family decided to follow Jiang Shining's advice to avoid any misunderstandings.

The Fang household usually retired by seven, but with so many people about, it wasn't until nine that everyone settled down. The lights in the courtyard's rooms were extinguished one by one, and the soft chatter gradually dropped away, leaving the courtyard in complete silence.

When Xue Xian opened his eyes, it was past eleven, and everyone in the residence was deep in sleep. Only faint snoring could be heard. The lamp in the room had burned through most of its oil, and the wick, untouched for a long time, cast a dim light.

However, Xue Xian didn't wake up because of the snores or the dying lamp. He woke up because the talisman on his forehead suddenly felt scorching hot.

Having absorbed one of his bones, Xue Xian was already feeling feverish. Somehow, the talisman on his forehead was even hotter, to the point where it felt like it was on fire. He hissed softly, frowned, and looked over at Xuanmin.

"Bald donkey?"

No response.

"Bald donkey? Take this damn talisman off. It's the middle of the night, and I'm not going to cause trouble," Xue Xian said.

The burning sensation on his forehead continued. There was still no response; he could tell something was wrong.

"Hey, bald donkey?" Finally, he changed his approach. "*Xuanmin!* Stop pretending to be dead. I know you're not asleep."

He stared at the meditating figure in the dim light, but after a while, Xuanmin still showed no signs of movement.

“Are you oka—”

Before Xue Xian could finish, the scorching-hot talisman on his forehead loosened and floated down to land on the floor in front of him.

Once the talisman fell, Xue Xian could move again. Without hesitation, he maneuvered his wheelchair to the bedside and reached out to touch Xuanmin’s hand where it rested on his knee. He touched Xuanmin’s fingers and was startled by their heat.

Of course, the talisman was made by Xuanmin. So any abnormality with it was connected to him.

“Hey, bald donkey?”

Xue Xian checked Xuanmin’s pulse and found it rapid and heavy. An inexplicable sense of unease washed over Xue Xian.

Could it be the mole acting up again? Since Xue Xian had witnessed Xuanmin’s strange episodes, he wanted to check the small mole on the monk’s neck. However, the room was too dim for him to see the mole clearly. Reluctantly, he leaned in closer.

The mole itself didn’t seem to have any blood vessels spreading from it, but something was still off. Xuanmin’s body temperature was extremely high. The heat radiating from Xuanmin’s neck warmed Xue Xian as he leaned in close. The slight dampness radiating from Xuanmin’s skin made Xue Xian even more feverish. The heat rushed to his head, leaving him feeling strangely lightheaded. His gaze shifted lazily from the mole on Xuanmin’s neck to staring at Xuanmin’s profile.

Perhaps the heat was making him sluggish, as his eyes became unfocused. He wasn’t sure if he was looking at Xuanmin’s eyebrows, the

bridge of his nose, or…

In any case, a high monk was still a high monk. Even with his body burning up, Xuanmin showed no signs of distress. His expression remained unchanged, exactly as it had been when he closed his eyes in the evening. If not for his rapid pulse and the heat emanating from him, Xue Xian might have been fooled by his calm demeanor.

Perhaps influenced by the heat from Xue Xian's body—or perhaps something else—Xuanmin's pulse grew heavier. The damp heat from his neck became more pronounced. Xue Xian watched Xuanmin's closed eyes, and for some inexplicable reason, he didn't feel like moving.

The heat fogged his mind, and his fingers, which were resting on Xuanmin's wrist, twitched.

Xuanmin's heavy pulse jumped in response, and he half opened his eyes and looked at Xue Xian. For a moment, their breaths were almost intertwined, creating a phantom of intimacy. Xuanmin's half-lidded eyes blended with the dim light of the room, making it impossible to tell where his gaze was focused—whether it was on Xue Xian's confused eyes, his damp nose, or somewhere lower…

It was as if a heavy, invisible barrier had fallen around them. It blocked out all external noise and left only the sound of their heavy, entangled breaths filling the space. It was a disorienting illusion, as if the entire room had become cramped and narrow. It felt impossible to move or look away.

Xuanmin's wrist suddenly moved under Xue Xian's hand. He turned his hand over and gripped Xue Xian's fingers tightly, pressing them down

firmly. Whether it was due to his body's reaction or a loss of control, his grip was unusually strong.

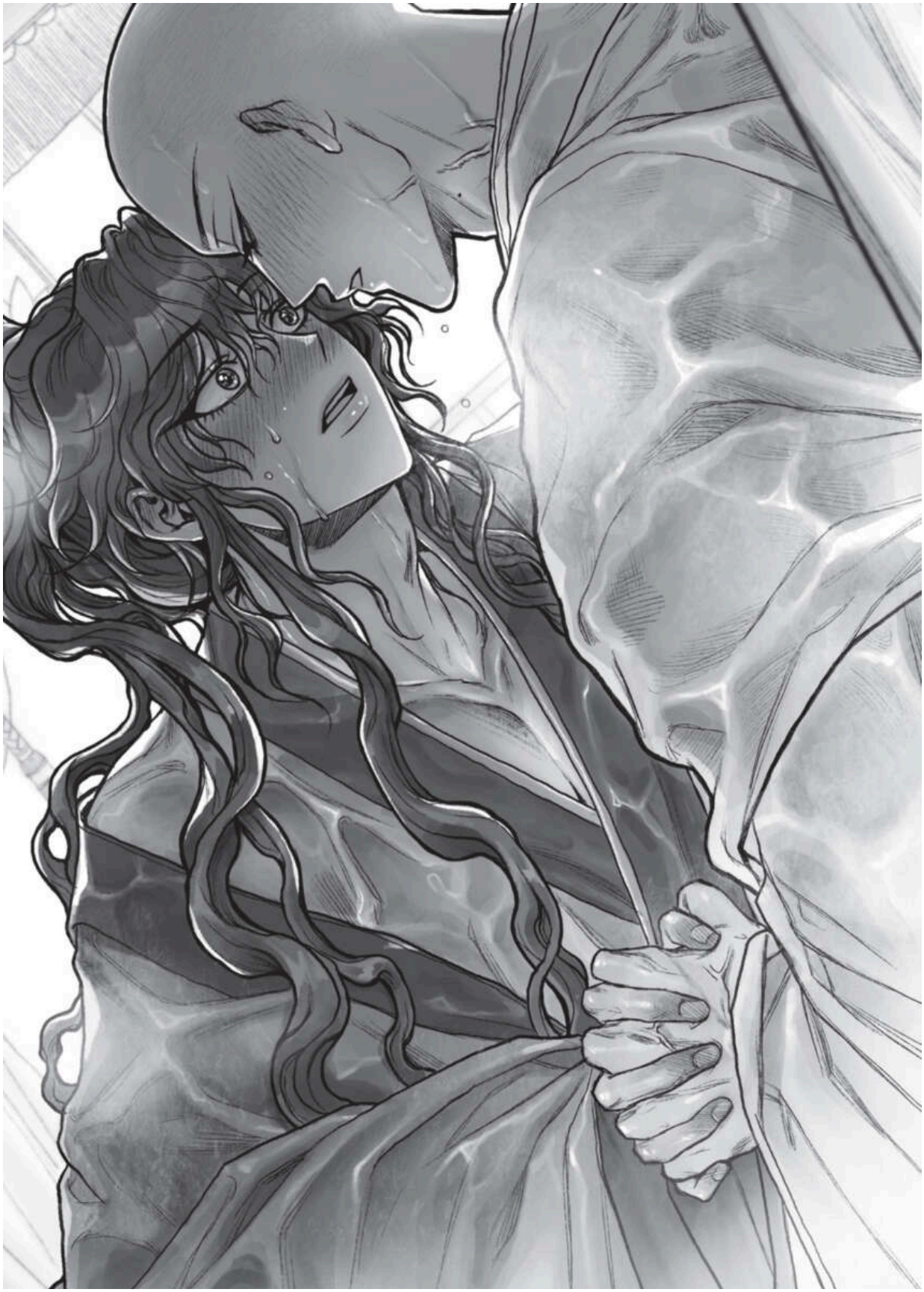
It was only then, in his dazed state, that Xue Xian processed that the dampness on Xuanmin's body was sweat—his neck, shoulders, arms, and even his palms were clammy. As Xuanmin twisted his wrist and bent each joint, his slippery fingers slid between Xue Xian's. When he clenched his hand, the skin between their fingers rubbed together. The phantom of intimacy grew stronger, like a ghost in the dark.

Xuanmin's half-dreaming eyes closed and then opened again. A drop of warm sweat fell from his chin—or perhaps somewhere else—and landed on the tip of Xue Xian's. It slid down the dragon's neck and disappeared into the collar of his robes.

Xue Xian's breath hitched, and his mind jolted awake.

Outside the courtyard, in the streets, a cat let out a long, drawn-out cry. In the night, it was startlingly loud, as if the cat were perched right beside the bed.

Xuanmin seemed to be fully awakened by the cat's cry. His fingers tightened, and he closed his eyes again.



Xue Xian's eyelids twitched, and his fingers, still in Xuanmin's grip, twitched as well. He abruptly sat up straight. Just as he was about to pull his hand back and roll his wheelchair away, Xuanmin straightened up too. His eyes remained closed, his expression unchanged, but his grip on Xue Xian's hand slackened.

After a long stillness, Xuanmin opened his eyes and gazed at Xue Xian beside him.

"Move further away."

His tone was unruffled, but his voice was a notch lower than usual, and a little hoarse.

Xue Xian had already moved aside, but his heartbeat and pulse that he had suppressed earlier now seemed to have found an outlet. His blood pounded like a newborn calf's. The sound of his heartbeat thundered in his ears, so loudly that he didn't catch Xuanmin's low words.

"Huh?"

Xue Xian's emotions hadn't quite recovered from the earlier phantom, and his voice came out a little nasal, docile, and relaxed.

Xuanmin paused.

"Nothing."

Xue Xian's pulse gradually returned to normal, and he let out a light sigh. However, the joints of his right hand, which had been squeezed numb, wouldn't let him forget what had just happened. As he flexed his fingers, he silently maneuvered his wheelchair to the table and turned his back to Xuanmin.

Under the pretense of adjusting the lamp wick, he pressed down on the discomfort in his chest. After a few adjustments, the lamp's small flame grew longer, and the room brightened. Xue Xian turned his chair around. In the glowing light, he finally got a clear look at Xuanmin's state.

His thin acolyte's robes were soaked with sweat, which left the contours of his shoulders and arms faintly visible through the damp fabric. No matter what kind of thoughts this might have stirred earlier, now that Xue Xian was calm, it didn't look particularly comfortable to him. Seeing Xuanmin's state, Xue Xian (for once) thought of someone else.

"Should I get you some water to clean up?"

Given Xuanmin's intolerance for any kind of filth, he must have been extremely uncomfortable with all that moisture. However, Xue Xian had forgotten about other things—like the fact that cleaning up would require undressing, and Xuanmin wasn't the only one in the room. As soon as Xue Xian asked the question, he remembered and wished he could take his words back.

Xuanmin, still meditating, remained silent. He opened his eyes, glanced at Xue Xian, then closed them again. "No need. Just move further away."

"How much do you dislike me? Any further and I'll be out of the room," Xue Xian retorted.

Without opening his eyes, Xuanmin waited until Xue Xian had moved back to the ostensibly "spiritually abundant" wall.

"That's not it," he said in a deep voice.

This vague statement left Xue Xian wondering what Xuanmin could mean. From where Xue Xian was sitting, he could see Xuanmin's profile at the edge of the bed, though most of it was obscured by the bed-curtains. However, this partial concealment happened to ease the earlier awkwardness. Xue Xian dropped his guard completely.

It had been awkward because…for just a second, Xue Xian had felt a certain physical reaction. Of course, he had stopped it before it could progress, but the fact remained. He wondered if Xuanmin had experienced the same thing.

Xue Xian rested his elbow on the armrest of the wheelchair, which was just the right height, and propped up his head with his hand as he leaned idly to the side. His other hand toyed with the string of copper coins while his thumb rubbed the edges of the coins in a leisurely rhythm.

Eventually, his gaze wandered from the flickering oil lamp to Xuanmin's figure.

If Xuanmin had experienced a similar reaction, it should have been obvious, given how drenched he was in sweat. But his extremely reserved, disciplined, and icy demeanor made it hard to imagine him with worldly desires. Moreover, he was sitting cross-legged in meditation, with the front of his monastic robes draped over his knees, making it impossible to see anything.

Why had this reaction happened so suddenly anyway?

The night was too quiet, and time moved at a snail's pace. While Xue Xian pondered this, he remembered the wound on the monk's hand that he had licked twice. There was also whatever Jiang Shining had been about to say before Xuanmin cut him off.

Xue Xian understood now why Jiang Shining had warned him not to misuse dragon saliva, but the reminder had come a tad late. He drily chuckled to himself, straightened his spine, and put on a serious expression to make himself look less like the instigator. He stopped staring at the unfortunate monk and, feeling guilty, closed his eyes and focused on healing with the copper coins.

This night of healing felt different than any before. It might have been because he had recovered another dragon bone or because two of Xuanmin's copper coins had been unsealed.

In the past, Xue Xian had only felt a faint, warm ache in the areas where his bones were missing and a sense of fullness at the sites of bone breaks, like the bones were about to extend outward. Now, the surging heat in his blood and the bone he'd absorbed found a clear direction. They gathered at the broken bone sites, extending from them and forming a thread. This thread seemed alive. Xue Xian concentrated his energy, and the thread slowly, bit by bit, grew longer.

However, the process was taxing. In just one night, the thread was only at half length, but Xue Xian felt as if he'd expended half a month's energy.

By the time the sky began to lighten and the Fang family members started emerging from their rooms, Xue Xian had already enlisted the help of Jiang Shining, who didn't need to sleep, to find a restaurant for some food.

His sister, who had just finished washing up and was preparing some medicinal concoction for the three beggars with rashes, called out to them as they headed toward the back door.

“A-Ning, Xue-gongzi, where are you two going?”

“We’re going to Huicui Residence,” Jiang Shining replied. He was somewhat familiar with the famous restaurants in Qingping County and could guide Xue Xian there.

“Huicui Residence? Why are you headed there so early in the morning? Aunt Chen is already preparing breakfast.”

Jiang Shining waved a hand. “The wise one here is picky. He doesn’t care about breakfast or dinner—he only eats meat, and it has to be a proper dish.”

“But at this hour, even if you go to Huicui Residence to order meat dishes, you’ll have to wait for them to prepare it.”

If it hadn’t been for Xue Xian and Xuanmin, the Fang couple might have still been stuck in Wen Village. They might have even died! So, the entire Fang family held a mix of awe and gratitude toward Xue Xian and Xuanmin. Simply calling them “Young Master” felt inadequate, and they certainly couldn’t let Xue Xian go *hungry*.

Aunt Chen happened to come out of the kitchen while Jiang Shijing spoke. The two women exchanged a glance, and Aunt Chen clapped her hands.

“I can make all the signature dishes from Huicui Residence. Just tell me what you’d like, Xue-gongzi. I’m quick, and I’ll have a table full of dishes ready in no time.”

Jiang Shijing nodded in agreement. “I’ll have Xingzi help Aunt Chen in a bit. You didn’t get to eat last night, so you must be starving by now.”

As a guest in someone else's home, Xue Xian wouldn't be so brazen as to order a whole table of dishes. So, for once, he was amiable with his request.

"I'll trouble you, in that case. Just make whatever's convenient, as long as there's meat." After all, he didn't eat grass.

However, there was something else. He darted his eyes left and right.

"Could you also prepare some hot water?" he asked Aunt Chen and Jiang Shijing. "That bald—Xuanmin was drenched in sweat last night and needs to clean up."

"Drenched in sweat?" The moment Jiang Shijing and Jiang Shining heard this, their inner physicians kicked in. They continued in near-perfect tandem: "Any other symptoms? Does he have a headache? Any nausea?"

Other symptoms…

"Nope," Xue Xian replied flatly. "With his physique, I doubt he caught a cold or fever. Maybe he went astray during meditation and suffered a qi deviation."

The Jiang siblings were flummoxed. *A qi deviation sounds much more serious than a headache or fever, Wise One!*

Remembering that "extraordinary people often have extraordinary quirks," the Jiang siblings decided it might not be appropriate to pry further. They took Xue Xian's word for it, for the time being, and sent someone to prepare hot water.

Xue Xian still felt unsettled when he thought about the events of the previous night. He would stay outside the room if he could, so he followed Jiang Shining around for a while, then shifted to Aunt Chen, until she

finally shooed him out of the kitchen. He then peacefully returned to the guest hall to wait for the meal.

Jiang Shining, who couldn't resist getting involved with medicine, went with his sister to prepare the medicinal concoction. That left only Fang Cheng, who was reviewing the account books, in the guest hall with Xue Xian.

After some thought, Xue Xian broke in. "May I ask you a question?"

Fang Cheng, the account book in hand, paused.

"Of course, of course! Ask away. I'll answer to the best of my knowledge."

Unlike Jiang Shining, Fang Cheng didn't know Xue Xian's true identity. Thus, he didn't need to worry about saving face when asking this question.

"Have you heard about dragon saliva? What are its effects? And if used on an ordinary person, are there any harmful consequences?"

"I've certainly heard about it," Fang Cheng said with a blink, "but I've never encountered it myself. Its effects… They're all just rumors."

"What do the rumors say?"

Fang Cheng wasn't much of a storyteller, so his answer was very matter of fact: "Well, they say that if a woman comes into contact with dragon saliva, she'll become pregnant and give birth."

This was quite the mess.

"There are also some other, modern rumors," Fang Cheng continued. "They say that in a certain place, someone was fortunate enough to obtain some and sell it for a sky-high price or use it in medicine. Supposedly,

besides being incredibly effective for curing diseases and detoxification, it has some other effects. Mostly related to nourishing yin, invigorating yang, and enhancing…certain pleasures. They say the effects last for quite a while. But it's all just rumors. If I could see such a miraculous medicine that heals, cures, and detoxifies in my lifetime, I'd die without regrets."

Having dealt with various medicinal ingredients for so long, Fang Cheng spoke about these effects with complete seriousness, devoid of any lewd implications—but, *still*! Though Xue Xian had guessed as much the previous night, hearing it spelled out by someone else was another feeling altogether.

So, without another word, he went to the courtyard and grabbed Jiang Shining.

"Let's make a deal. How about I switch rooms with you tonight?"

"No," Jiang Shining said. "Staying in the same room as the master for one night would be enough to send me to the afterlife. Didn't we agree I'd stay a couple more days to celebrate my sister's birthday?"

Xue Xian tried again.

"All right, fine. Instead of that, just let me stay in your room. I don't take up much space anyway."

"Shitou Zhang would wet the bed if you startled him," Jiang Shining said with a dry laugh. "And don't you think Nianqi would go crazy?"

Xue Xian sulked.

Jiang Shining felt like he was playing the role of a nanny without being paid, and it was shortening his already nonexistent lifespan. "What, did you upset the master again?"

“I caused him just a little bit of trouble.” Xue Xian pinched his thumb and index finger together to indicate a tiny gap.

Right, so it’s definitely a troublesome and difficult problem, not just a little one, Jiang Shining thought.

As the two were talking, the back door of the courtyard opened, and two young men dressed as herb gatherers walked in carrying baskets. They paused when they saw Jiang Shining and Xue Xian, then greeted Aunt Chen, who had just come out of the kitchen with a basin of food.

“Aunt Chen, good morning. What are you cooking? It smells amazing. We’re starving. Where are the young master and mistress?”

“The young master and mistress are busy. Go put away your baskets, wash your hands and faces, and we’ll eat soon,” Aunt Chen told them.

“Ah, by the way,” one of the herb gatherers said as they put down their baskets. “I know we were supposed to be back last evening, but we ran into a horse caravan on the road. They cleared the way, so we were delayed by a night.”

“A horse caravan? What horse caravan?”

“An official one,” the herb gatherer said, his tone suddenly turning mysterious. “You know how the plague in our county was reported to the authorities? The court sent an official horse caravan for a plague-dispelling ritual. They should be entering the county town this morning. Guess who they sent?”

“A ritual?” Aunt Chen was startled. “You don’t mean…”

The herb gatherer slapped his hand. “That’s right! They say the caravan is made of those who serve directly under the state preceptor’s

command. There are too many official titles, and I can’t remember them all. But apparently, they usually follow the state preceptor. They’re probably some of the few who’ve seen that man’s face.”

Chapter 25:
The Court of Imperial Sacrifices

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF Qingping County, a long procession of horses and carriages advanced in a grand manner. The attire of this group was quite unusual. They wore wide robes with large sleeves, each patterned with fierce beasts on the chest and back. Apart from these designs, the robes were entirely white. They fluttered in the wind stirred by the galloping horses. Their sleeves billowed like clouds in a striking blend of ferocity and purity. Judging by their robes and builds, the riders were of indeterminate ages. They appeared noble and disciplined, as if they'd been fiercely trained in etiquette. On their faces, each wore an ancient-beast mask, making it impossible to discern their features.

The procession consisted of about a hundred people, and they marched in two parallel lines with three carriages in the middle that had their curtains tightly drawn. On either side of the carriages stood tall banners, six in total, with black backgrounds embroidered with faint but intricate patterns. These designs were hard to make out at first glance, but when they caught the sunlight, the outlines of the threads flashed. In the center of each black banner were two large, coiled characters: Taichang—*the Court of Imperial Sacrifices*.

In previous dynasties, the Court of Imperial Sacrifices had been responsible for rituals related to heaven, earth, spirits, and the balance of yin and yang. The court was overseen by a chief and deputy, who managed various affairs. However, since the court came under the control of the state

preceptor, its authority had become quite limited. The chief of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices now served as the state preceptor's deputy.

The current state preceptor was so old that no one could accurately recall his age, and his deputies had already changed several times. It was said that, in addition to selecting one or two children with Buddhist potential every few years to be raised and educated, the state preceptor also chose a group of talented boys and girls to be trained by the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. These children, known as "zhenzi," served as performers in ritual ceremonies until they turned sixteen. After that, some of them would take on other roles within the court.

The whole of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, from the chief and deputy to the ritual masters and diviners, and even the zhenzi, were deeply connected to the state preceptor, especially in recent times. They could almost be considered his disciples.

The procession split into two groups at a fork in the road. About twenty people and one carriage headed toward the main district of the county. This was the team tasked with driving out the plague. The remaining hundred or so turned onto a mountain path.

The two leaders at the head of the second group wore jade pendants with tassels in addition to strings of yellow-skinned copper coins around their waists. The patterns on the jade pendants differed. The pendant on the left featured a black tortoise with a long-feathered bird standing on its back, which encircled two small characters: taibu—*chief diviner*. The pendant on the right bore a horned beast's face with a small octagonal bell hanging above it. This also encircled two small characters: taizhu—*chief ritualist*.

The chief diviner and the chief ritualist were both from the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. The chief diviner was responsible for divination and interpreting omens, while the chief ritualist oversaw rituals and ceremonies.

As the procession began its ascent up the mountain path, the leader wearing the chief diviner pendant raised a hand, signaling the group to halt. The entire procession stopped in an orderly manner without any confusion.

The chief ritualist turned to the chief diviner. His masked gaze bore a hint of curiosity. “What is it?” Though his tone was steady, his voice sounded young, like that of a man in his early twenties.

“I need to confirm our direction once more,” the chief diviner replied, making it clear that she was a woman. She sounded just as young, clear, and gentle, but also as efficient as a sharp knife.

She removed the rough ancient-beast mask, revealing a delicate face far softer than what had concealed it. Judging by her appearance, she seemed even younger than her voice suggested, perhaps only seventeen or eighteen. However, her refined eyebrows and lake-deep eyes lent her an air of quiet composure that balanced her youthful appearance.

The position of chief diviner was somewhat unique. Since the responsibilities of divination and dream interpretation were tied to natural talent, those who became chief diviner were often individuals with exceptional aptitude, regardless of gender or age. Women tended to be more sensitive in these areas, so female officials had dominated the role recently.

The chief ritualist nodded. “That’s a good idea. We must ensure there are no mistakes, especially since this is related to natural disasters and human calamities. If we’re wrong, it won’t be easy to explain later.” He

raised a finger upward, indicating the heavens, then his tone grew a little fearful. “*He* certainly wouldn’t be pleased.”

The chief diviner shot him a glance before she returned her attention to the clouds in the sky. “The state preceptor has always been pragmatic, fair in both rewards and punishments. There’s no such thing as him being pleased or displeased. Besides, even if we return, we won’t get to see him. You’re overthinking it.”

“Lass, come on, I was just talking. Must you always be so serious?” the chief ritualist said helplessly.

“I must.” The chief diviner’s expression remained blank.

She pulled out a grass knot, a turtle shell, and a piece of paper that carried the scent of bamboo leaves. She carefully unfolded the paper with long-dried ink that had been written some time ago. Its contents were brief, comprising only a few words, and at the bottom was a red seal bearing two simple characters: *Tongdeng*.

After confirming the location mentioned on the paper, she refolded the paper and put it away. She arranged the grass knot and turtle shell in her palm.

“Be cautious with your words,” she warned, fiddling with the objects in her hand. “Especially when discussing the state preceptor in front of me. I might just lose my temper.”

The chief ritualist shook his head with a wry smile. “You’re always putting words in my mouth. Even if you gave me the courage of a lion, I wouldn’t dare to speak carelessly about him.”

Although everyone in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices had some connection to the state preceptor, the nature of those connections varied. For example, the two leaders walking side by side had been brought in by the state preceptor over a decade ago. They had grown up together in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, received the same education and training, progressed from zhenzi to regular duties, and eventually reached their current positions. Their experiences were similar, and they were of the same generation. However, while the chief ritualist feared the state preceptor more than he revered him, the chief diviner held far more reverence than fear—far, far more.

She focused on her divination, ignoring her companion.

Then, she stared at the grass knot in her hand, raised her head to the sky, and murmured a soft "Huh?"

"What is it? Did we go the wrong way?" the chief ritualist asked.

The chief diviner furrowed her delicate brow and did not answer for a long time.

"I divined…" she muttered. "But it shouldn't be."

"Stop speaking in half sentences, young lady. What did you divine?" he pressed, following her gaze to the sky. Apart from a large mass of dark clouds, he couldn't see anything unusual. He inspected the grass knot in her palm from where he stood, but aside from it being slightly frayed and old, he couldn't spot any issues.

"Nothing major," she said slowly. "I just divined that someone who shouldn't be here is currently in Qingping County. But it's impossible…" She shook her head. "Never mind. It was just a vague resemblance. I must

have made a mistake. Let's focus on the task at hand. I've confirmed our direction. We need to head southwest along this mountain path."

"Where will we stop?"

"See that mountain over there that looks like a winnowing basket?" She gestured forward. "Head toward it."

The chief ritualist signaled to the procession behind him and spurred his horse in that direction.

"Let's move out."

Meanwhile, in the Fang family's backyard, a different conversation was taking place. It had begun when Jiang Shijing, who'd been treating the three feverish beggars, discovered that one of the scrawny little beggars was a young girl.

"This is quite unfortunate." Jiang Shijing gestured to her left cheek. "The rashes on the other two, the old man and the young boy, are still below the neck. But this little girl has a large patch on her left cheek. These rashes aren't just about broken skin and bleeding—they cause the flesh to rot. The damaged tissue will need to be removed, and even after it heals, her face…"

Everyone knew how terrifying the rashes could be and saw the extent of the little beggar's blemish. They could imagine the scars it would leave on her face. Half of her face would be disfigured. She was still young. To lose her beauty at such an early age—what would become of her?

The tendency to worry was a family trait of the Jiangs, and Jiang Shijing was deeply concerned for this little girl, though she was neither family nor friend.

Xue Xian happened to have been rolling past in his wheelchair. He overheard Jiang Shijing's words and paused. When Xue Xian was faced with tasks that could be done or skipped, his actions were dictated by his mood. Aunt Chen's cooking skills were genuine, and the hearty meal she had prepared that morning had left him thoroughly satisfied. Someone so well-fed and content could even temporarily forget the troubles he'd caused —so much so that he didn't notice Xuanmin emerge from his room and walk toward them.

Xue Xian had never been one to freeload, but pulling out gold pearls in front of everyone would make it seem like he was treating the place as an inn. He'd been wondering how to repay their hospitality when he overheard Jiang Shijing's concerns and had an idea.

"I might have a solution for the girl's face," he interjected.

Jiang Shijing and the others were taken aback. "What? What solution?"

If Xue Xian could create a paper body for Jiang Shining, who had no physical form, he certainly had a way to address the little girl's facial injuries. But how?

"I can't conjure new flesh out of thin air, so we'll need to use something as a substitute," he explained.

Jiang Shijing was no fool, and together with Jiang Shining, who had firsthand experience of Xue Xian's abilities, they brainstormed a plan.

"A substitute… Something that can blend with a human face… Hmm, what about a mask?"

Shitou Zhang, who had been eating nearby, raised his hand. “I can carve one! I’ll make sure it’s luxurious!”

“Shut it.” Xue Xian glared. “Does food not even quiet you down? Have you ever seen a face adorned with blooming flowers and coins?”

Shitou Zhang hung his head and returned to his meal.

“I meant the kind used in disguises,” Jiang Shining tried to clarify. “Something that can fit the face. But since it’s still a mask, it’ll ultimately depend on you…”

He looked at Xue Xian, who nodded. “That’s more or less what I had in mind.”

“But…who can make such a thing?” Jiang Shijing asked, somewhat embarrassed.

Shitou Zhang quickly swallowed his food. “I can!”

“Really? Don’t you just carve stones?” Xue Xian asked skeptically.

“Some skills are transferable,” Shitou Zhang said, waving his hands. “I’ve seen someone do it before, and besides, I have nimble hands. I can make it detailed.”

A pudgy, balding man boasting about his dexterity was quite a sight. However, no one else present had his level of skill or knew the art of disguise firsthand, so the task fell to him anyway.

Shitou Zhang wasted no time and listed the materials he needed, then went to wash his hands thoroughly.

While he was busy, the others were also preoccupied. Lu Nianqi had been sitting in a corner of the yard since the early morning. In one hand he held the black cloth that had been used to blindfold Shitou Zhang during his

kidnapping, and with the other he drew on the ground with his sticks. He would ponder his drawings for a while, then erase them and start over.

The materials Shitou Zhang needed weren't excessive, and fortunately, Fang Cheng's household had no shortage of supplies, especially those related to medicine. Aside from one special ingredient, everything else was readily available.

"What's still missing?" Jiang Shijing asked.

Shitou Zhang coughed. "Glue," he muttered like he had a toothache.

Xue Xian spun around in an instant. "What kind of glue?"

"Dragon glue," Shitou Zhang said with a wince.

"What the hell is *dragon glue*? I've never heard of it."

"It's glue made from…dragon skin," Shitou Zhang said. Had he just signed his own death warrant? He mentally slapped himself.

Why did you have to volunteer for this? You're digging your own grave.

"Nonsense!" Xue Xian spat. His face darkened. "Who dares to make glue from dragon skin? Point them out to me!"

"No, no, it's just a name. You know how it is—whenever there's something rare and mysterious, people like to give it a grandiose name. Nine times out of ten, they associate it with dragons, even though it has nothing to do with them. That glue… It's actually something brought by merchants from the Western Regions. It's probably made from animal hides, okay…?"

But Xue Xian's temper had flared at the mention of dragon skin.

“Forget about using some dubious glue. Use pig skin instead!” he declared.

“Got it,” Shitou Zhang said, not daring to argue with the wise one.

Xue Xian had spoken with great authority. When he turned around, he found Xuanmin standing behind him. After a brief, silent exchange of glances, Xue Xian rolled his wheelchair away at breakneck speed.

Xuanmin watched him go in baffled silence.

Glue made from pigskin would actually work quite well, but the key lay in getting the timing and heat just right—too early or too late, and it wouldn’t work. Shitou Zhang stood by the pot and waited. When he estimated it was about time, he reached to scoop out the glue, only to have his hand stopped by someone else’s.

He recognized the snow-white sleeve immediately and turned around respectfully. “Master.”

Xuanmin didn’t say much as he looked at the pot. “Let it simmer for another quarter of an hour.”

“Master, do you also know how to make that kind of mask?”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Shitou Zhang regretted them. Xuanmin paused, and his face hardened with a pensive frown.

I was just asking casually, Master. No need to take it so seriously… Shitou Zhang silently rotated toward Jiang Shining, who crouched by the stove tending the fire.

What do I do? I’m panicking, Shitou Zhang mouthed.

Jiang Shining shrugged. *You brought this on yourself.*

When Shitou Zhang reluctantly turned back, Xuanmin had pulled his hand away and was frowning at the pigskin glue in the pot, lost in thought.

To be honest, his pristine monk's robes, untouched by even a speck of dust, were out of place in the smoky kitchen. Just standing by the stove seemed to make the fire shrink back timidly.

Shitou Zhang couldn't begin to guess what Xuanmin was thinking, but judging from his expression, it didn't seem pleasant. Not daring to disturb him, Shitou Zhang tried to usher the great master out. Then, he and Jiang Shining could stare at each other in awkward silence.

Fortunately, while Xuanmin sometimes seemed detached from human affairs, he was far more approachable than Xue Xian, who delighted in stirring up trouble. The bubbling sound of the pigskin glue brought Xuanmin to the present.

"The fire's too low."

He strode out of the kitchen without so much as a backward glance at Shitou Zhang or Jiang Shining. The hem of his snow-white robes swept past the door and disappeared.

Shitou Zhang let out a long breath. "That was suffocating. I'm getting too old for this kind of scare. My heart was pounding like crazy…"

Jiang Shining quietly exhaled and added more straw to the fire.

"The master really is something," Shitou Zhang marveled. "How does he know how to do everything? Take this, for example—" He gestured to the pot of pigskin glue. "No one around here dabbles in this kind of thing. I only got to see it once when a wealthy man took me to Liangzhou. That area is close to the border, and the people and affairs there are

complicated. Some folks learn these kinds of skills to protect themselves. These things take years of experience to master. I'm not saying this to be rude, but…the master is so young. Even if he's talented, his age limits how much he could have seen and experienced. How did he accumulate all that knowledge?"

Shitou Zhang wasn't the only one wondering this. Jiang Shining often felt the same way, thinking that Xuanmin's wisdom and composure far exceeded what someone of his age should possess.

Shitou Zhang, a mid-life man with few hobbies, had an endless fascination with uncovering people's pasts. He peeked into the courtyard and lowered his voice.

"Take Wise One Xue, for example. Sometimes he seems at a disadvantage against the master. Like today! I noticed the wise one seemed to be avoiding him. Just think about it. A man in his twenties, able to subdue a real dragon? A real dragon! How old must he really be?" He really rambled on like a bald sparrow with eight mouths. "And another thing! How old is the dragon wise one, anyway?"

Jiang Shining rubbed his ears, which were ringing from Shitou Zhang's incessant chatter. "Even ghosts don't know."

Shitou Zhang may not have understood how Xuanmin knew how to make such masks, but he followed the master's instructions precisely, stoking the fire and waiting the full quarter of an hour. Afterward, he scooped out the glue into a bowl and carried the hot vessel into the courtyard with a series of huffs and puffs. The bowl clattered as he slapped it on the table, then he pinched his ears and hopped from foot to foot.

"It's done, it's done. Where are the other materials?"

Fang Cheng had gathered the necessary materials and placed them on the table. Some were chopped while others had been ground into juice. They were arranged in dishes and bowls like ingredients for a meal.

Shitou Zhang didn't waste any time and got to work. The others were curious but kept their distance and watched in silence without disturbing him with comments or questions.

Xue Xian found the whole process quite interesting. He'd heard of "human skin" masks before, but this was the first time he'd seen one crafted. However, due to certain unmentionable reasons, he couldn't stay in one place for long—every time he caught sight of Xuanmin, he would roll his wheelchair away. Sometimes, he headed to the front hall to bother the twin brothers, and other times he pestered the beggars.

Can't even enjoy the show in peace! he scoffed (while avoiding Xuanmin like a coward).

As he was zooming around in circles, he missed most of the mask-making process. By the time he made his way back, Shitou Zhang was nearly done. Only the mold was left to complete.

The little beggar girl was still bedridden and half of her face was terribly disfigured, which made it difficult to work on her directly. This gave Shitou Zhang's craftsmanship a chance to shine. He went into the room and studied the intact side of the girl's face for a long time, memorizing every detail. Then, he gestured vaguely at the damaged portion, as if visualizing the reconstruction. When he emerged, he confidently started to shape the mold. This was undoubtedly the most meticulous and time-consuming part of the process.

After a long while, he unveiled the finished product. However, it wasn't what Xue Xian had expected. He had imagined a single, complete piece, but instead, there were two separate layers—one a little thicker with a gentle curve, the other as thin as a cicada's wing.

"Huh. Why are there two pieces?" Xue Xian couldn't help but ask.

"When making this kind of mask, it's better to add than to subtract," Shitou Zhang explained. "For example, filling out a thin face or raising a low nose bridge… That girl's face is too uneven. She's got broken skin *and* missing flesh. We need to fill it in to make it smooth. The thicker piece is used to fill in the missing parts, while the thinner one blends the filled areas with the rest of the skin. It's like patching and then covering."

As Xue Xian listened, he stared at the two pieces in Shitou Zhang's hands. The color and texture had been meticulously adjusted, and at first glance, they looked almost like real human skin.

Wait!

Real human skin…

Xue Xian whirled his chair around and, without a word, rolled his wheelchair over to Xuanmin. He tugged on Xuanmin's sleeve, pulling him down a few inches.

"Bald donkey, does what Shitou Zhang's holding look like what you remembered in Wen Village? You said there were scenes from your youth where you were holding human skin. Could it have been something like this?"

Though he phrased it as a question, Xue Xian was about 70 to 80 percent certain of this. After all, why would a teenager, especially one with

Xuanmin's temperament, hold peeled human skin? Given his repulsion at even a drop of blood, was that likely? A human skin mask, on the other hand, would have been a different story.

Having asked his question, Xue Xian fell into a bout of wild speculation, but he didn't hear a response from Xuanmin. When he finally looked up, he saw Xuanmin gazing down at him, his expression unreadable —neither happy nor upset, not unlike his usual aloof demeanor, but with a subtle difference.

Xue Xian couldn't quite put his finger on what was different, but being stared at so neutrally made him feel guilty again. The urge to roll his wheelchair away surged inside him.

"Not running anymore?" Xuanmin replied, his tone a bit salty.

The way Xuanmin phrased the question made it seem like Xue Xian was being cowardly. Annoyed, Xue Xian quickly changed the subject. "So, was it really a human skin mask? You were making masks at such a young age, instead of copying scriptures?"

"I don't remember."

He didn't deny the first part of Xue Xian's statement, which meant he tacitly agreed with Xue Xian's guess that what he had been holding back then were parts or the entirety of a mask. Still, why would a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old need something like that?

Xue Xian narrowed his eyes, deep in thought, when he suddenly felt the sleeve he had been tugging pull away. Then, Xuanmin gently gripped Xue Xian's chin and turned it toward the stone table where everyone was gathered.

Xuanmin's voice sounded beside Xue Xian: "Go finish what you promised to do first."

He didn't know what to say and instinctively reached up to touch his just-pinched chin. By the time he came to and looked toward Xuanmin, the monk was already back inside the house. He clearly had no intention of watching the spectacle.

Xue Xian couldn't tell if it was just his imagination, but…

Doesn't the bald donkey seem…a little upset?

With a proper substitute in hand, Xue Xian worked his magic on the two pieces of faux skin.

Jiang Shijing followed Xue Xian's instructions and tested the pieces on the back of her hand. Once the two layers adhered to her skin, they looked as if they had grown there naturally. The texture, color, and even the tiny imperfections were indistinguishable from real skin.

"When the little girl wakes up, give this to her. If she can handle what she looks like when her wounds scab over, fine. If not, just attach this to her face. There won't be any trace of it," Xue Xian explained. "The effect won't wear off as long as I'm alive."

This only deepened Xingzi's admiration for him. Her dark eyes sparkled, and she stared unblinkingly at him whenever she had a free moment.

"Xue-gongzi, do you think you could make a mold of my face? Maybe make me look twenty years younger?" Aunt Chen half joked.

Uncle Chen turned his face to the side and pulled Aunt Chen away by the hand.

The members of the Fang family, each with their own temperaments, nevertheless formed an unspoken agreement not to pry. Although they had seen Xue Xian perform feats beyond the capabilities of ordinary people, not a single one of them asked any questions. They were both polite and considerate.

As everyone was tidying up the dishes and bowls, Lu Nianqi, who'd been sitting quietly in the corner, waved at Xue Xian.

"What is it? Have you found something?" Xue Xian asked.

Lu Nianqi nodded. "I'm not as skilled as Shijiu. I can't divine the exact times, but I can say that at least from last night until this morning, the person who touched this black cloth was still in the place I divined. As for whether they'll leave tonight, that's hard to say."

"No matter. Let's go take a look. If we can catch them red-handed, that's great. If not, we can at least confirm they haven't gone far. There will be some traces left behind," Xue Xian said. He cocked his head slightly. "Go on, tell me. Roughly where is it?"

"A mountain shaped like a winnowing basket."

"Shaped like a winnowing basket?" Xue Xian, who wasn't very familiar with the area, repeated the words blankly.

Xingzi piped up from where she'd been watching him. "Mount Boji! I know, I know! Look—go straight in that direction, exit the main city gate, follow the southwest mountain path, and after following the forest outskirts, you'll reach it."

It was nearly noon, so Xue Xian wanted to waste no more time. As soon as he heard this, he made the decision to set out. According to Xingzi,

it wouldn't take them much time to get there.

The chief ritualist, leading the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' procession at the end of the southwest mountain path, looked up at the mountain ahead.

"We should be almost there. Once we get past that stretch of forest outskirts, we'll be close."

True to its name, Mount Boji—*winnowing basket*—was located behind a stretch of wild forest, near a small village on the outskirts of Qingping County. The sunny side of the mountain was dotted with large paddy fields that gave it a fresh and picturesque appearance, half hidden in the thin mist. However, it was called Mount Boji because the shaded side had a large, basketlike depression, perpetually shrouded in dense fog. Standing at the mountain's peak and looking down, one could not see a thing within the depression. Occasionally, someone would trip and fall in, or a curious soul would venture in on their own. None ever returned.

As a result, there were many rumors about Mount Boji. Some said that too many people had died in the cavity, turning it into a mass grave of bones. Others claimed that there were inhabitants in it, and faint human voices could sometimes be heard, along with eerie sounds resembling a baby's cry. Whether the sounds were human or ghost, no one could say. The rumors were numerous, and none had ever been confirmed.

A decade or so ago, there were those who sought death there, but such reckless individuals were hard to find these days. As a result, even the legends had faded, and few people talked about it anymore. The younger generation only knew that there was a Mount Boji and that it was a place not to be casually ventured into. Beyond that, they knew little.

The court's procession moved apace. They avoided the sunny side of the mountain with its small village and paddy fields and instead circled around to the shaded side. Before long, they encountered Mount Boji's fog.

The chief ritualist raised his hand again, halting the procession behind him.

"Which way do we go, lass?" he asked.

Before them were two paths: One skirted the depression and led to the side of the mountain, while the other plunged deep into the fog. The fog was damp and cold, with a faint, mysterious scent—something woody or medicinal. In both appearance and smell, it seemed toxic.

The chief diviner, who had already confirmed the route multiple times, glanced once more at the turtle shell in her hand before pointing decisively at the fog. "This is indeed the right way. Let's go."

The chief ritualist sighed.

"Regardless of anything else, everyone, protect your faces…and your eyes," he told the procession behind them.

They were all mortal beings, and none of them were foolish enough to cling to false confidence in an unknown situation. The members of the procession each pulled a small brocade pouch from their robes. They took out a pill to counteract the poison and placed it under their tongues, then retrieved a simple, archaic-looking sachet and pressed it against their noses beneath their masks.

The chief diviner lifted a crescent-shaped bell from the saddlebag on her horse. Its silver edges were adorned with small octagonal bells. She pulled out a stack of paper talismans, tossed one into the thick fog, and

shook the crescent bell three times. Next, she spurred her horse forward. The horse, guided by the faint tinkling of the bells, walked into the dense fog.

The chief diviner led the way, with the chief ritualist close behind. The procession, originally in two columns, now formed a single line, moving in an orderly fashion into the fog.

Inside it, everything was a vast expanse of white. Nothing could be seen, not even the shapes of the horses beneath them. The feeling of being cut off from both front and back was incredibly unsettling, even terrifying.

However, the chief diviner's face showed only vigilance, not panic. Her delicate brows furrowed slightly as she maintained a steady rhythm, shaking the bell every five steps, guiding the long procession deep into the mountain depression. About halfway through, a young and inexperienced member of the group who had never seen anything like this began to panic.

When people panic, their breathing becomes erratic.

The young zhenzi had just entered the fog when he took a few extra breaths, allowing the fog to enter his mouth and nose. Before they had proceeded three more steps, there was a dull thud, and the zhenzi slid off his horse. He collapsed to the ground and clutched his throat. His lungs gasped for breath like a bellows. The person behind him, though uneasy, adjusted his own breathing. With his fear suppressed, he reached out to pull the convulsing youth back onto the horse.

The chief ritualist's voice drifted faintly from the front, as if coming from another world.

"Don't break the rhythm. Keep your breathing steady."

Even with such instructions, seven or eight zhenzi still succumbed to the fog during the journey, their bodies convulsing as they spat out bloody foam.

They were dead before long.

Chapter 26:
The Building in the Fog

THE CRESCENT BELL RANG urgently five times to signal that the chief diviner had reached their destination.

They stood roughly in the center of the mountain depression. Surprisingly, the fog here was not as thick as it had appeared from the mountain peak. Instead, it was a thin layer, like the mist that rises from the ground on a rainy day, nothing like the smothering fog they had encountered earlier. In this translucent mist stood a small bamboo building, about three stories tall and exquisitely crafted.

Perhaps because it had been shrouded in the fog for so long, every bamboo pole of the building gleamed with moisture, appearing clean and fresh. If not for the poisonous fog, it would have been an elegant and tranquil residence.

The chief diviner and chief ritualist who had reached it first examined the small building from their horses.

The rest of the group arrived and encircled the building. If not for their masks, their expressions would have revealed how grim they felt: Just finding this place had already cost several lives. Who could feel at ease in the aftermath?

“Don’t let your guard down. Even the slightest amount of fog is toxic,” the chief diviner reminded the zhenzi.

She exchanged a glance with the chief ritualist, and the two dismounted. With practiced ease, they placed paper talismans around the

building, setting up a simple array.

The moment the array was complete, the fog around the building dissipated, drawn toward the thicker fog outside. Only then did the court procession put away their sachets and dismount, following their leaders to inspect the area.

They had come here to find someone. Who exactly, the zhenzi didn't know. They had only seen a portrait, but they had no idea what the person did or why they were looking for them. Only the chief diviner and chief ritualist knew the details.

The chief ritualist glanced at the three-story bamboo building and asked the chief diviner once more: "Are you sure it's here?"

The chief diviner herself felt that this place was both an excellent hiding spot and a potential death trap. If the fog kept people out, it was perfect for concealment. But if it didn't, there would be no escape. She didn't answer.

"Enough. Let's search the area first," the chief ritualist said, no longer asking questions. He quickly assigned tasks to the zhenzi.

Soon, the two leaders and five zhenzi entered the bamboo building. They headed straight for the rooms inside. Outside, the remaining hundred or so members of the procession guarded the perimeter.

The three-story bamboo building wasn't particularly large, and the seven of them quickly finished searching it.

"Well?" The chief ritualist hurried down from the top floor. He held a scroll in his hand. He flipped through it, hoping to find *something*, but then shook his head and tossed it onto a wooden table.

The chief diviner stood in the elegant and simple guest hall on the ground floor.

"Nothing," she admitted.

The chief ritualist crossed his arms and scanned the area before saying, "Lass, I'm not doubting your calculations, but…could you have missed some clues that affected the result?"

Faced with the facts, the chief diviner wasn't angered by the question. Instead, she sat down at the table, placed the grass knot and turtle shell on its surface, and began to examine them carefully.

"Should we…burn the shell again?" the chief ritualist asked.

The chief diviner shook her head. "It would be no use. You can't burn the shell twice in one day for the same matter. Let me take another look." However, after a moment, she couldn't help but murmur a soft sound of confusion.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. It's still the person I mentioned earlier. When I was doing my calculations, they happened to be in this town and were caught in the shell's patterns."

The chief ritualist was utterly confused. "The person you said couldn't possibly be here? Who exactly are you talking about?"

The chief diviner looked up at him, her dark eyes visible through the holes in her mask. They were filled with uncertainty. "It must be someone with a similar birth chart or fate. It can't possibly be the one I'm thinking of. After all…"

"Stop beating around the bush. Who is it? Just say it!"

The chief diviner unfolded the thin paper stamped with the red seal and pointed at the characters: *Tongdeng*.

"The state preceptor."

"Who?!" The chief ritualist subconsciously reached for his ear but stopped when he touched the edge of his mask.

"The state preceptor."

"No, no, that's impossible!" The chief ritualist shook his head vigorously. "The state preceptor is still at the top of Famen Temple. We saw him before we left. He's in seclusion. You know the rules. If he leaves midway, all his efforts will be wasted."

"Of course I do. That's why I said it's probably just someone with a similar fate. It can't possibly be him. But…"

"There's no 'but' in this case." The chief ritualist waved his hand. "Let's focus on our primary task."

However, even as he said this, he couldn't shake a strange sense of discomfort.

Just as the chief diviner turned her attention back to the turtle shell, a faint sound came from the distance, like something just brushing against bamboo leaves. At the same time, the grass knot on the table shifted slightly, as if blown by a breeze, changing its position.

The chief diviner gathered her things and hurried out of the bamboo building.

"There was definitely a change," she said once she was outside. "We need to leave this depression immediately. If we delay any longer, the person will escape!"

About ten minutes later, another group of people stood at the crossroads where the procession of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices had stopped.

"Which way should we go? The way that looks like a death trap, or that one, which looks clear and fog free?" asked a short, stout man with a dejected expression.

Of course, it was Xue Xian and his companions.

Since Jiang Shijing's birthday was in two days, Xue Xian didn't want to delay matters, so he left Jiang Shining behind at the Fang residence to spend more time with his sister. The rest—Lu Nianqi, Shitou Zhang, and Xuanmin—he brought along.

Lu Nianqi was a human compass, though his accuracy was hit or miss. Still, he was useful for someone as directionally challenged as Xue Xian. Shitou Zhang remembered the person who had kidnapped him, so he would be needed for identification if they found the culprit. And Xuanmin… Whether he was useful or not, Xue Xian felt he had to bring him along. He couldn't explain this impulse. Perhaps it was habit after they'd traveled together for so long. Not bringing him just felt odd.

However, while he had followed his inexplicable urge to drag Xuanmin along with him, Xue Xian now regretted it. After all, last night's incident still hung between them, and Xuanmin's mood had been off all day. Plus, what had Fang Cheng said earlier? Ah, yes—the effects of dragon saliva wouldn't wear off in just a day or two.

Oh my.

While Xue Xian was mentally berating himself for being an idiot, Lu

Nianqi pointed at the fog.

"Do you even need to ask at a time like this? Obviously, we take the path that looks like certain death," he said drily.

"Is this fog p-poisonous or not?" Shitou Zhang asked.

"If it's certain death, how could it not be poisonous?"

"Th-then how do we get through?"

"We wade through it."

Screw you! Shitou Zhang almost turned around on the spot to run.

What was even more eerie was that, on top of the woody scent, he thought he caught a whiff of blood in the fog—fresh blood, at that. His legs turned to jelly, and he wanted to burst into tears in front of Xue Xian. Maybe that would evoke a shred of pity from the wise one.

Fortunately, before Shitou Zhang could conjure any tears, Xuanmin spoke up. His tone was indifferent: "No need to panic." As he spoke, he reached for a paper talisman.

His composed demeanor reassured Shitou Zhang somewhat. After all, Xuanmin was always reliable. If he said they could cross the fog, there was definitely a way to survive crossing the fog. At the sight of Xuanmin's talisman, Shitou Zhang knew he was about to set up an array. He sidestepped to avoid getting in the way and even tugged Lu Nianqi along with him.

However, just as Xuanmin was about to use the talisman, Xue Xian snapped out of his daydreams. In one swift motion, he pressed Xuanmin's hand back down.

“Such a trivial trick doesn’t need a grand setup. Watch me handle it.” Xue Xian tilted his head and smirked.

With that, he slapped the armrest of his chair. A faint crack echoed, and a fierce, howling wind swept by, like a raging dragon crossing a river. It brought with it an overwhelming force that surged forward.

Whoosh!

The dense fog that had lingered for who knew how many years was swept away like it had never been. Its absence revealed the old trees in the mountain depression, bent low to the ground, and a clear path.

Xue Xian turned to Xuanmin with his chin raised. Though he didn’t say anything, his expression, which was mischievous as ever, somehow managed to convey a sense of *Aren’t you going to praise me?*

Xuanmin glanced down at him.

“The armrest of your chair is cracked.” His tone was still a *little* salty.

Xue Xian thought that someone like Xuanmin, who couldn’t read the room and always ruined the mood, deserved to be buried at the bottom of the ocean.

With the thick, white fog gone, things that had been hidden by the mist were now revealed. Xuanmin scanned the path and the half-withered grass on either side.

“Someone came here and then left.”

Xue Xian snorted loudly in response. *Who says I can’t be sarcastic too?*

Shitou Zhang, who had overheard Xuanmin, was baffled. Had someone really come here?

“Why would an ordinary person come to a place like this? To seek death?” Yet, as he spoke, he realized something else. “Wait, they came and then left? They left *alive*?”

Anyone who managed to enter this place definitely didn’t stumble onto it by accident, and anyone who could survive the fog unscathed was no ordinary person.

Shitou Zhang clicked his tongue. “Could there be another group looking for our target too? Seems like he’s caused trouble for more than one party. But if they came in and went, it means they either settled their debt, took him away to settle their debt, or the person they were looking for wasn’t here to begin with…”

Shitou Zhang wasn’t stupid, and he loved to chatter. In just a short while, his mouth had done the work of four, voicing everyone’s thoughts.

Xue Xian turned to Lu Nianqi. He thought the dragon was going to ask if his divinations were accurate or tell him to redivine the changes, but just as Lu Nianqi was about to speak, Xue Xian stopped looking his way.

He instead seized a handful of wind and leaned back in his chair like a boss. The wheels of his chair started rolling down the path toward the depths of the mountain depression. In the blink of an eye, he was already dozens of feet away. His drawling voice drifted back to the others.

“Let’s just search this place. If the person we seek really isn’t here, we’ll go after the group that left. A human only has two legs. Even if they’re on horseback, that’s only two more. How fast could they be? I could catch up to them even after a nap.”

Well, there was always *someone* who loved to show off and make

things difficult for those stuck on the ground.

Xue Xian sped ahead alone. Aside from the overgrown weeds on either side of the path, there were no other obstacles. It seemed the fog had been the biggest barrier. In no time, he arrived at the three-story bamboo building at the center of the mountain depression.

Xue Xian was the type who disliked relying on others, mainly because there were very few people capable of rendering him aid in the first place. Xuanmin was the only exception, but even he was just a mortal, and Xue Xian still held his precious string of copper coins.

So, naturally, Xue Xian took the lead. His intention was to investigate the center of the depression first, then thoroughly search the rest of the area. If there were any traps or obstacles, he could deal with them to avoid future trouble. If the person they were looking for wasn't here, it would save those two-legged mortals the trouble of running back and forth.

In short, his demeanor was carefree and unrestrained, and his aura was imposing. However—this damn bamboo building had three floors! The stairs twisted and turned. Its bamboo planks were thin, and everything was interconnected. One wrong move, and the whole thing could collapse.

With all that in mind…*someone* used the wind to propel himself to the building's front, then effortlessly lifted his chair to the second floor balcony in one smooth motion. He fully intended to continue this imposing momentum and enter the building to ransack it, but he realized the damn door was too narrow to fit his chair. To get in, he'd have to blow the door open. But if he did that, the entire building would probably collapse. He couldn't touch the door, nor could he move past it.

In short, the damn door had been put there to piss him off. It was a blatant provocation!

That was why, when Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi followed Xuanmin to the front of the building, they saw Xue Xian sitting blank-faced by the second-floor door. He had his head propped up with one hand.

At Xue Xian's cold expression, Shitou Zhang asked, "What's wrong? Is our target really not here?"

Xue Xian gave a frosty glare. Shitou Zhang, certain he'd said something wrong, covered his mouth.

"He hasn't started searching yet." Lu Nianqi was not afraid of Xue Xian's temper.

"Huh? Why not?" Shitou Zhang's words were muffled behind his hand.

Lu Nianqi didn't have time to answer before Xuanmin walked up the bamboo stairs to Xue Xian. The other two said nothing more and scurried after him.

Xuanmin didn't ask Xue Xian why he was just sitting there. Instead, he walked through the three interconnected rooms on the second floor and then proceeded up the delicate stairs to the third floor. Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, not wanting to stand idly by or annoy Xue Xian, followed.

They turned the entire bamboo building inside out in record time. However, they found nothing. Not a trace of the person they were looking for. Not even a ghost.

Xue Xian watched them come and go in front of him. Though his face remained flat, he practically radiated irritation.

“Really, there’s nothing here,” Shitou Zhang muttered.

“No, he’s here,” Lu Nianqi insisted.

As he spoke, a faint rustle of leaves came from the forest, and they all froze.

Shitou Zhang peered into the depths of the forest. “Could he be hiding in there and have taken the chance to run?”

Without the fog blocking the view, the forest was clear, and the sound was distinct enough to pinpoint its direction. After a moment, a pitch-black crow flew from the canopy.

“Maybe the previous group had the same thought as you,” Lu Nianqi said.

“Huh! You mean they also searched the place and found nothing, then heard the sound in the forest and… That does make sense.”

Since he was a coward, Shitou Zhang was also neurotic. He could hear one thing and pull a whole string of related thoughts from it.

“What you said…made it sound like that bird is some kind of spirit that deliberately leads people away. Tch! Maybe it really is. Think about it. How could that bird stay in the forest with such thick fog? Could the fog really be nontoxic? No way. So the bird must be suspicious.”

Lu Nianqi didn’t care to respond to his long ramble. He repeated his earlier words: “The person we’re looking for is still here.”

“How do you know?” Shitou Zhang darted his eyes around the room. “Did you divine something else? When did you do it? I sure didn’t see you!”

Lu Nianqi rubbed his ears as if to drive out Shitou Zhang's incessant buzzing. "I didn't divine anything. It's intuition."

If someone else had mentioned intuition, Xue Xian might have told them to get lost. But when someone with a spiritual constitution like Lu Nianqi spoke about intuition, it wasn't so easy to dismiss.

"Use your intuition again," Xue Xian said to him. "If that person is here, where in this building would they be?"

Lu Nianqi blinked. Since when could intuition be summoned at will? Some people really took advantage of the fact that others didn't dare strike them when they were completely unreasonable. Lu Nianqi rolled his eyes in restrained frustration. After standing still for a moment, he pointed at a spot.

"Here."

He was pointing nowhere else but the room right next to Xue Xian.

Just great. Stuck at the door again.

"That room only contains a table, two chairs, and a wooden cabinet. To be honest, I even checked the drawers in the cabinet. There's no one there!" Shitou Zhang grumbled.

"The inner chamber," Lu Nianqi said.

The design of the bamboo building was quite unique; it was clearly the work of someone with refined taste. The first floor only had rooms on one side, while the other side was a platform supported by bamboo poles. The platform and the roof of the first-floor rooms formed a large enough plane, upon which rested the second floor they were now on.

However, the first-floor rooms didn't have doors that could be accessed from the outside. You had to go up the stairs to the second-floor

platform, through the room next to Xue Xian, and then go down the stairs inside to reach the first floor. The inner chamber Lu Nianqi mentioned was the one on the first floor.

"We've searched that room too," Shitou Zhang said. "It just contains a bookshelf and a desk. I even shook out every book to see if someone was hiding inside."

Xue Xian tapped his fingers on the armrest. "Then shake out the books again."

Young people these days! Why do they love to joke around, especially when you can't scold or hit them? Shitou Zhang groused to himself as he trailed behind Lu Nianqi into the room.

Shitou Zhang was unable to resist a backward glance. If he hadn't known Xue Xian's true identity, Shitou Zhang might have called him "Little Brother Xue." But Xue Xian was a dragon—would he dare call him a brother? Calling him "Ancestor" might have been suitably grand, but it would still feel strange. Jiang Shining called him "Wise One," but that term carried a certain connotation. If someone not close to him used it, Xue Xian would definitely give them a beating. As a result, every time Shitou Zhang wanted to address Xue Xian, he gave up because he didn't know how.

He wanted to ask Xue Xian why he wasn't coming in but looked to Xuanmin instead.

"Master, why aren't you joining us?"

It felt a bit ominous that only he and Lu Nianqi were moving forward, especially since Lu Nianqi was so certain that someone was still hiding downstairs.

“I’m coming,” Xuanmin replied. He eyed Xue Xian, who was sitting there doing nothing, before he bent down to pick him up.

“What are you doing?!” Having grown accustomed to moving at lightning speed, Xue Xian was suddenly thrust back into the days of being carried around. He was so mad he could spit.

“Don’t move,” Xuanmin said in his recent saltier tone. He stepped into the room.

Shitou Zhang’s eyes widened. “What…?”

Xuanmin didn’t answer.

“The chair got stuck outside the door and couldn’t come in,” Lu Nianqi interjected.

Xue Xian let out a cold laugh and imagined all the ways he could threaten the two of them for teasing him. Before he could say anything, though, he noticed something was off. Xuanmin was blazing hot, even hotter than he’d been last night. Yet his palms were as cool as always, and despite the heat, he wasn’t sweating at all. His abnormal body temperature was clearly due to Xue Xian’s dragon saliva.

Feeling a pang of guilt, Xue Xian became more subdued.

However, if Xuanmin’s condition was caused by the dragon saliva, why was it presenting so differently from the night before? If Xuanmin hadn’t been carrying Xue Xian, he wouldn’t have noticed anything unusual. The only possibility was that Xuanmin had used some method to suppress the effects, keeping all the influence contained within his body so that others wouldn’t notice a thing. No wonder his tone had been off all day.

Never mind saltiness—if Xue Xian were that uncomfortable, he'd bury anyone who annoyed him in a mountain of salt.

Now completely subdued, Xue Xian obediently let Xuanmin carry him down the bamboo stairs to the first floor.

As Shitou Zhang had said, the room was sparsely furnished, with only books and a desk—no chairs. Once Xuanmin entered the room, he set Xue Xian down on the desk and turned to leave.

The oil lamp on the desk was lit; Shitou Zhang had turned it on when they first entered. The yellowish light illuminated the small room, but there was no obvious place to hide anyone. Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi didn't bother flipping through the books again. They skipped the bookshelf and began feeling along the bamboo walls, looking for hidden mechanisms or secret rooms.

Meanwhile, Xuanmin, while re-examining the bookshelf, casually pulled out a book and flipped through it. But as soon as he did, his hand froze.

The book he had randomly picked contained some annotations, and the handwriting in it was unmistakable. The writing was lean and forceful, with distinctive connections between certain strokes that few could imitate. Xuanmin could tell at a glance the exact pressure that had gone into each curving stroke.

It was his own handwriting.

Anyone who suddenly saw their own handwriting in a completely unfamiliar place would be shocked. The fainthearted might even find it eerie. Not a pleasant feeling, in any case. If this had been some ordinary place, it might not have been so bad, but this bamboo building was full of

mysteries and ill omens. Few people would choose to live in a place surrounded by poisonous fog. Finding traces of himself here was deeply unnerving.

Fortunately, the book itself was fairly mundane—just a handwritten travelogue by an unknown author. The annotated passage was simple and described how the traveler had stumbled into a corpse shop in Langzhou to escape the rain and encountered a corpse driver by coincidence.

The annotation was even simpler, just four words: *Langzhou, Xia Mountain.* It was less of an annotation and more of a label.

Xuanmin frowned, staring at the four-character annotation for a long time. It wasn't until Xue Xian called out to him that he snapped out of his thoughts.

The latter had been keeping an eye on Xuanmin while directing Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi. Seeing him frozen there with the book, he had to ask: "Bald donkey? Why have you been standing there motionless for so long? Did you find something?"

From his angle, Xue Xian could only see Xuanmin's profile. The dim oil lamp cast deep shadows under his brow, accentuating the contours of his eye sockets and nose bridge. This also made his expression appear unusually solemn, as if he'd seen a ghost. It was an odd look on Xuanmin, and it felt like a waste not to see it closer. Xue Xian called out to Xuanmin a couple more times.

Xuanmin's gaze remained fixed on the page as he shook his head without looking up. "It's nothing."

It was a reflexive dismissal. When Xuanmin glanced at Xue Xian, he paused in the middle of reaching for another book. In the end, he put the

book down and walked over to the desk.

Xuanmin had a unique aura, especially when he was doing something on his own. It was like the world had nothing to do with him, no matter how many people came and went around him—a sense of detachment and solitude, as if he existed in his own world. This solitude wasn't melancholic or wistful; it was distant and cold. Such a monk seemed more suited to standing alone in an ancient, snow-covered Zen temple, with a bronze and ebony pagoda behind him and the temple's heavy gates in front. Beyond its gates, the world bustled with worldly affairs; within it, the monk stood amid clouds and snow.

So, when Xuanmin dismissed him, Xue Xian thought it was as much as he expected, even though it left him somewhat uneasy. And then, when Xuanmin looked up, changed his mind, and walked over, it was as if the temple gates had opened from within. This simple sequence of events pleased Xue Xian for a reason he couldn't name.

His good mood didn't last long. Xuanmin handed the book to Xue Xian and pointed to the annotated passage on the open page.

Xue Xian examined the marked section and the annotations beside it but saw nothing worth investigating even after reading it twice. "Is there something wrong with the annotations?"

"Mm."

"Okay, so, what is it?"

To Xue Xian's surprise, Xuanmin calmly said, "The handwriting is mine."

For a moment, Xue Xian's heart skipped a beat, and his emotions grew troubled. On one hand, Xuanmin's unreserved attitude thrilled Xue Xian. On the other hand, why would something linked to Xuanmin appear out of nowhere?

The person he was pursuing was closely linked to the one who had extracted his bones. In this vast world with countless places to hide, that person had chosen this obscure, fog-shrouded location. In the very same room, traces of Xuanmin had appeared…

For a moment, Xue Xian stared at the handwriting on the page, his mind blank. His heart felt as if it had plunged into an icy river, sending a chill through his entire body.

That settled it.

Xue Xian silently exhaled, and the words on the page became clear again.

"So what if you wrote it? Are you showing off your calligraphy skills?" Xue Xian scoffed. He flipped through a couple more pages. He said this purely to mask the suspicion that had arisen in him. Although he had quickly dismissed it, no one appreciated being suspected. Regardless of small matters, Xue Xian didn't want Xuanmin to feel any sort of rift forming between them.

He slapped the book down in front of Xuanmin. "Compared to mine, it's still lacking." He gestured with his other hand, indicating a significant gap. "By *this* much."

Shitou Zhang, who overheard this while searching the corners of the room, realized that there really were people in this world with no sense of shame. Truly astonishing. Even more shamelessly, the two most capable

members of the party were lounging around while he—a middle-aged man, practically elderly—and a half-blind person were left to search for clues in the room. To whom could he even complain about this?

Xuanmin had been prepared for some kind of reaction from Xue Xian after revealing the book's secret to him, but he had never expected Xue Xian to respond like this. His calm gaze didn't waver, but he stared at Xue Xian for a long time.

Xue Xian just sneered. "What can you deduce from one book? Call out and see if the room answers you."

Seeing that Xue Xian was getting more and more unreasonable, Xuanmin averted his eyes and decided not to engage further. Just as he was about to turn back to the bookshelf to pull out a few more books, something *did* answer.

A series of chaotic flapping sounds came from outside. They grew closer until a midnight-black bird flew into the room.

Everyone was startled. Xue Xian almost summoned a gust of wind to blow the thing away, but on a second look, he realized it was just a bird that was black all over.

The room they were in spanned two floors, so its ceiling was quite high. A bird that flew in wouldn't immediately collide with anyone.

"Is that the bird from the forest?" Shitou Zhang asked as soon as he saw the black bird. It seemed like the one that had almost led them astray.

With his exceptional eyesight, Xue Xian had sussed out the bird's appearance as it flew in under the lamp's light.

“Yes, it’s the same one,” he said with a nod. “But why did it come in?”

At that point, the bird’s actions shocked everyone in the room.

It circled near the high ceiling twice, as if searching for someone. Soon, it found its target, swooped down, flapped its wings to slow its descent, and landed on Xuanmin’s shoulder. It rubbed its downy face against Xuanmin’s cheek and chirped a soft “Ying.”

Shitou Zhang had no words.

Lu Nianqi, however, coldly remarked, “Crows don’t sound like that.”

Xue Xian was probably the most speechless. He was eating crow for sure. He had said *“Call out and see if the room answers,”* and this stupid bird had done just that. Not only that, but it had also made such an odd sound. It even had the nerve to land on the bald donkey’s shoulder and rub against his face, flapping its wings so hard that it sent feathers flying into Xue Xian’s mouth.

Really… What nonsense is this?!

Xuanmin was also surprised by the black bird’s actions, but when it obediently landed on his shoulder, he stopped in his tracks. Even without flipping through the books, he knew the answer. Birds were sensitive creatures. No bird would land on a stranger’s shoulder and rub against their face.

Shitou Zhang was unable to make sense of the situation. “Wh-what’s going on?”

Xue Xian eyed the stupid bird and snorted. “Isn’t it obvious? This bird recognizes the bald donkey.”

“So…” Shitou Zhang murmured.

“So this house probably belongs to the monk,” Lu Nianqi said.

If Lu Nianqi and the others had seen the book Xuanmin was holding, they wouldn’t have had any doubt.

“This is your house,” Xue Xian said, looking into Xuanmin’s eyes.

Xuanmin glanced at the black bird on his shoulder. He usually disliked people or things getting too close to him, but when the bird rubbed against him, he felt a strange sense of familiarity, as if he knew this sensation from a past life. He felt no disgust. In his heart, he had already concluded this house was his.

Xue Xian stared into Xuanmin’s eyes, and Xuanmin looked back without flinching. He acknowledged his statement with a calm “Mm.” And he didn’t look away, continuing to gaze quietly at Xue Xian. Whether it was an illusion or not, his eyes seemed heavy under the flickering light of the oil lamp, making Xue Xian feel as though Xuanmin cared about his reaction.

Xue Xian averted his eyes. “That really is a stupid bird.”

The black bird spread its wings and let out a cry, then pecked at him.

“It even understands human speech. It really must be a spirit,” Xue Xian said in a sour voice. “When you call out to the bald donkey, it’s all soft and cooing, but when it comes to me, it’s so harsh? Is that right? I think you don’t want those shiny, smooth feathers of yours anymore!”

This evil spirit who’d lived for who knew how many centuries still had the nerve to pick fights with a bird. He actually reached out to pluck the bird’s tail feathers. The bird, unwilling to put up with him, let out a few

harsh cries and flapped to Xuanmin's other shoulder, putting some distance between itself and Xue Xian.

Xue Xian stopped smiling and returned his attention to Xuanmin. "If this house is yours, then so be it. You're not the one who extracted my bones—I'm certain of that. But you might still have some link to that person. I hope you were enemies, not…allies."

Xue Xian's expression was cold as he spoke, and Xuanmin matched him. The atmosphere was so tense that Shitou Zhang didn't dare to breathe too loud in his corner, and even Lu Nianqi, who usually ignored others, felt uncomfortable.

Xue Xian stared into Xuanmin's eyes, not missing a single flicker of emotion. If he wasn't mistaken, when he said the last sentence, Xuanmin's expression had briefly changed. The change was subtle and hard to discern, but at least…it wasn't indifference. After traveling together for so long, if Xuanmin remained completely unmoved by the idea of being his enemy, it might have been time to part ways.

Xue Xian felt a vague sense of unease—nothing was wrong, yet something still felt missing. But now wasn't the time to dig deeper. He put away his half-serious, half-mocking expression and returned to his usual lazy demeanor.

"With that face that looks like it finds everything filthy, I doubt you could ever ally with anyone," he said. "The other party would probably be driven to madness. Stop brooding and check the corners and cracks. Since this is your house, your intuition should be sharper than anyone else's. Speak! Where's the secret?"

He theatrically slapped the desk, fully playing the role of an interrogating jailer.

The ability to change one's mood faster than flipping the pages of a book was something ordinary people couldn't handle. Xuanmin wasn't ordinary, and he still found himself somewhat flummoxed. He remained silent for a moment, until the spirit bird rubbed against his face again, let out a rough cry in Xue Xian's direction, and flew to a corner of the ceiling. It flapped its wings in the direction of a protruding bamboo joint.

With a sudden click, the ground beneath their feet shook and began to sink straight down.

There was another world beneath this room?!

Chapter 27:
The Life-Sharing Spider

XUE XIAN'S HEARING was extraordinary. As soon as they reached the bottom and the mechanism stopped, he heard faint breathing in a distant corner. However, the breathing was strange—so light it seemed on the verge of stopping, though it was steady and rhythmic. The breaths, light and slow, gasped three times before they ceased, leaving no further trace.

Xue Xian frowned and pointed toward the corner. "That might be the person we're looking for. Why did the sound suddenly stop? Could they be dead?"

Xue Xian's unlucky two-wheeled cart was still outside the bamboo house, so he couldn't freely move at the moment. He could only sit on the table and watch as Xuanmin walked straight toward the direction Xue Xian had pointed.

The oil lamp on the table had dimmed significantly since they sank into the underground, leaving only a tiny, weak flame that seemed like it might go out at any moment. It could not penetrate the deep darkness of the underground, but the faint light revealed that they were in a square stone chamber, about as wide as the room above. However, the small flame couldn't illuminate the far end of the room, so it was impossible to tell the full extent of the chamber's size.

Xuanmin's figure disappeared into the darkness beyond the light. He walked in silence, as if he had been swallowed by shadows and left no trace. Xue Xian's heart tightened. It wasn't panic—after all, he had rarely

experienced such an emotion in his life. It was more like he'd sensed something strange.

Suddenly, the sound of a mechanism rang out overhead again with a loud hum.

Xue Xian's brow twitched. He whipped his head up in time to see a huge black shadow stretch across the empty space above. With a click, it sealed tightly and became the floor of the room above…and the ceiling of this underground stone chamber.

If Xuanmin hadn't lost his memory, Xue Xian would have wanted to ask: *Did you build this damn house just to mess with people? The exit is sealed before we could get out. What kind of joke is this?*

If it weren't for the fact that this place belonged to Xuanmin, he would have already lifted the newly sealed ceiling. However, Xue Xian had been through a lot in his life. A single sealed ceiling, while annoying, wasn't that big a deal. Let it be sealed. Once they caught the person they were after, they could figure out how to lift the roof with minimal fuss. So he looked away, back into the darkness ahead.

In that instant, he sensed that something else had gone awry. Something was missing…

Yes, it was too quiet. Even Shitou Zhang's incessant chatter had stopped—

No, wait! Where was Shitou Zhang?!

Xue Xian's brow furrowed as he scanned the area. There was no sign of any living creature within the reach of the light, let alone Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi.

“Bald donkey!” Xue Xian called into the darkness ahead. “Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi are gone.”

For a moment, he even suspected that Xuanmin had disappeared as well.

Fortunately, Xuanmin’s calm voice came from the dark corner, though his words were anything but calming: “The person hiding here is also gone.”

Xue Xian’s scowl deepened. “You didn’t find them?”

Xuanmin emerged from the darkness, dressed in white. He walked back to the table, picked up the oil lamp, and headed toward the corner where Xue Xian had heard the breathing.

The flame of the oil lamp was indeed very weak. As Xuanmin walked, it gradually illuminated the path ahead. The light was minimal, only forming a circle at Xuanmin’s feet, as if his robes were brushing it into existence. Meanwhile, the area where Xue Xian was seated grew darker and darker until it became pitch-black.

In the near-total darkness, Xue Xian saw Xuanmin stop. His hand holding the oil lamp moved back and forth, lighting the area—the end of the stone chamber.

Under Xuanmin’s deliberate movements, both corners were clearly visible. Indeed, there was no one there.

Xue Xian’s hearing had never failed him before. He was certain that the breathing he’d heard earlier was definitely from this spot, no mistake about it. Moreover, based on the sound he’d heard, it’d been someone on the verge of death, much like the flickering flame on the brink of

extinguishment within Xuanmin's grasp. Could such a person really have slipped away under his and Xuanmin's watch?

Just moments ago, Xue Xian had been unsure of their situation. The ground had sunk too quickly, and his attention had been completely drawn to the breathing he'd heard, so he hadn't paid attention to Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi. He had even wondered if the two hadn't followed them down and were still outside.

Now, even the hidden person was also missing. If he didn't realize something was wrong by this point, then his head was only good for making him taller.

"Someone's playing tricks to avoid trouble," Xue Xian said, tilting his chin in Xuanmin's direction. "Have you checked that area carefully? Any clues?"

Things sure were inconvenient without his wheelchair. He had to rely on others, and although he never doubted Xuanmin's abilities, sitting in the dark waiting for someone else to draw conclusions was frustrating. Xue Xian was not one to sit still.

Without thinking, he flicked his sleeve at the edge of the table he was sitting on, and the entire wooden table hoisted into the air. Seconds later, Xue Xian, along with the table, landed beside Xuanmin with a heavy clang.

Despite the loud noise, Xue Xian remained seated. The wind from the table's movement lifted Xuanmin's sleeve and subsided as Xue Xian landed, returning the stone chamber to silence.

Xuanmin's lamp-lit face seemed surprised, but he said nothing. He examined the corner and the ground with the light, leaving out not even the smallest detail.

Xue Xian pointed to a small spot in the corner, right against the seam of the wall.

“There’s a drop of blood here.”

Xuanmin took a closer look, then seemed to remember something and turned to shine the light on the corresponding corner. “There’s one here too.”

He gestured at Xue Xian to wait a moment, then strode to the other corner with the lamp. After a quick glance, he turned back to Xue Xian in the darkness. “That person set up an array.”

“So, when they couldn’t escape, they started playing tricks. What kind of array is it?”

He wasn’t as knowledgeable about arrays as Xuanmin, since he rarely needed to use them. He couldn’t determine what kind of array it was just based on a few drops of blood and their positions. That was something for the bald donkey to figure out.

“It’s not a dangerous array, just time-consuming,” Xuanmin said. He returned with the lamp.

“In such a small stone chamber, it probably can’t be too dangerous. But what do you mean by time-consuming?” Xue Xian didn’t look happy.

“This array is called the Nine-Linked Rings.” Xuanmin placed the lamp back on the table. “There’s no way to break it.”

“What do you mean, no way to break it? Are we just stuck here?”

“Ordinary arrays have gates. Although the eight gates are ever-changing, you can escape the array if you find the right one,” Xuanmin explained. “But the Nine-Linked Rings has no gates, and it doesn’t depend

on the trapped person's abilities. This array is often used to escape dangerous situations. It lasts for an hour, after which it collapses on its own."

Xue Xian was almost amused. "If we wait an hour to get out, the duck we're after will have flown away."

He didn't have the patience to waste an hour in this damned place. As he chuckled coldly, he raised his hand.

"Wait." Seeing the dragon's expression, Xuanmin frowned and tried to stop him.

Too late. In the small stone chamber, several purple-white lights flashed, each with immense power, and struck the walls of the chamber. The collision of the white light and the walls created deafening explosions, one after another.

Clearly, Xue Xian was angry. Since the array had no gates, he planned to force his way out, blasting through until he created an opening.

However, the Nine-Linked Rings was a sinister array. The lightning bolts that shot around the chamber not only failed to create any openings but also ignited fire. Crimson flames rolled over every spot struck by the lightning, and in a flash, the walls were covered in towering flames. The flames were long enough to almost lick at his and Xuanmin's sleeves.

That wasn't the most annoying part. The worst was the heat rising from the flames on the walls. It quickly filled the entire stone chamber. If this continued, it would turn into an oven.

For a moment, Xue Xian felt as if he had returned to the golden marble to roll around in the heat near Xuanmin's hip. A dragon like him

who often traveled with clouds and thunder, ascending to the heavens and diving into the seas, preferred coolness and water. He hated the kind of heat that made people sweat rivers.

The table Xue Xian was sitting on shook a little as someone leaned against it. Amid that heat, he turned his head and saw Xuanmin, frowning with his eyes closed. One of his hands rested on the edge of the table.

Oh no.

The effects of the dragon saliva hadn't worn off yet. Xuanmin had been suppressing a body full of fire already. Now, with the external flames, it wasn't just unbearable—it could lead to the dispersion of his true essence or even a qi deviation.

Xue Xian instantly drew back his hand. The lightning bolts disappeared, and the flames on the walls subsided. Eventually, not even a trace of scorch marks remained on the walls. It was like nothing had happened.

But of course, that wasn't the case. The *flames* were gone, but the heat still steamed around them. To make matters worse, the flickering flame of the oil lamp reached its end and went out with a hiss. The stone chamber plunged into complete darkness.

In extreme darkness, in the complete silence, the slightest sound was amplified. With his keen senses, Xue Xian found it particularly unbearable.

Xuanmin's breathing was terribly clear in the darkness. The echoes bounced off the walls, then they pressed against Xue Xian's ears like they intended to bury him alive. The heat made Xue Xian's mind go blank, and his reactions slowed. He couldn't withstand the continuous waves of heat

and heavy breathing. He felt a layer of sweat form on his body, and his thin clothes started sticking to his skin. His temper rose.

"What's going on…?"

"The Nine-Linked Rings is true to its name…" Xuanmin's low voice resonated in Xue Xian's ears. "Each time you try to break the array, the burden on the trapped person increases. It can stack up to nine layers."

In his muddled mind, Xue Xian thought that just one layer was already unbearable. If it stacked to nine, he and Xuanmin would be cooked. He bit his tongue, keeping his bellyaching about why it had to be fire and not water to himself. He was worried about Xuanmin's condition. From the sound of his voice, he was in a bad state. They needed to find a way out.

At the very least, I need to help the bald donkey recover a bit.

Xue Xian thought this through his confusion, but what could he do? The array couldn't be forced apart, and he didn't have any pills or tools to help.

Wait.

Something came through the fog in his mind: Since he was a true dragon, his entire body was a treasure! Anything he discarded was a priceless artifact to mortals. Unfortunately, he couldn't easily remove his dragon scales or horns in such a cramped space. If he transformed into his dragon form, Xuanmin would probably suffocate from the lack of space. Besides, even if he extracted those parts, they couldn't be directly consumed. They had to be ground into powder and made into medicine. Too troublesome.

Other than dragon scales and horns, the only things that could be used to save someone were dragon saliva and dragon blood.

Right, there was still blood.

With the lesson from the dragon saliva fresh in his mind, Xue Xian didn't act recklessly this time. He raised his sweaty hand, groped around in the dark, and patted Xuanmin when he found him.

"Dragon blood… Would blood have any negative effects?"

There was a moment of silence.

"No," Xuanmin replied.

"Then it's settled. I'll get some for you."

Xue Xian had just exhaled a hot, heavy breath and was wondering where to make a cut when he heard Xuanmin give his own labored breath.

"Really?"

For a moment, Xue Xian was stunned. Before his heat-addled brain could process it, he felt Xuanmin's fingers grasp his chin. Without meaning to, Xue Xian moved his head in the direction of the fingers' pressure, and something pressed against the side of his neck.

Xue Xian's breath hitched. His hand at his side twitched but didn't rise; it only gripped the edge of the table tighter. Something seemed on the verge of happening, and another strange feeling mushroomed in his muddled mind, but it never found an outlet. The sensation on his neck was so vivid it almost overshadowed everything else. Something was lightly pressing against his skin. With just a bit more force, in the blink of an eye, it would pierce through and press in.

"Wait."

Abruptly, Xue Xian realized what was strange—given Xuanmin's extremely disciplined nature, even in such a situation, he would only tell Xue Xian to stay away. He wouldn't agree to drink dragon blood so easily and certainly wouldn't choose to drink from the neck.

The smoke haze cleared from Xue Xian's mind. His expression turned cold. With one hand, he swept the person in front of him away.

He was naturally strong, and his sudden bursts of strength were often uncontrollable. If he shoved anyone aside, they would be smashed into the opposite wall and shatter it. Yet there was no dull thud of a body hitting anything. Instead, the room filled with the sound of something like beads falling to the ground—

Tap, tap.

At that sound, everything around them dispersed like mist. The unbearable heat and the pitch-black darkness were all driven away. Xue Xian calmly scanned his surroundings.

He was still sitting on the table, and the ceiling above was still open. The oil lamp on the table was still lit, and Xuanmin was beside him with his eyes closed and his hands hanging by his sides. As for the missing persons, Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi, they were lying on the ground, unconscious.

He had seen this before. They were trapped in some array and had yet to break free.

Xue Xian chuckled coldly and turned to grab at the dark corner.

Immediately, a heavy object was dragged across the ground to rest in front of him. It was a person—a man, slumped on the ground, dust-covered and disheveled, who reeked of blood.

"First, tell me about the sinister array you set up," Xue Xian said. He swiped two fingers up, and the man's chin lifted like someone was squeezing him by the throat. "Answer me. Have you touched the dragon bones? After you answer, I'll give you a chance to bargain. You can pick how you'd prefer to die."

The man's mouth frothed with blood, but even so, he managed a ragged smile.

"What a pity," he said hoarsely. "Just a little longer, and it would have been done… But no matter. There are still three more."

Xue Xian's expression turned frigid, and he raised his hand.

"You… You can't help them. The inner demons… They have to break free on their own. If even one is a little late…" The man paused meaningfully, then let out a low laugh. As he laughed, he choked on more blood, and coughed so hard his whole body curled up.

Inner demons…

Xue Xian frowned. He had heard of arrays that used inner demons to trap people. In fact, such arrays were often used in life-threatening situations, either when facing opponents far stronger than oneself or when surrounded by too many enemies. These arrays could buy some time to

escape. They were also some of the few ways to defeat stronger opponents when outnumbered. After all, everyone had inner demons—desires, confusions, or at least some lingering thoughts, big or small, near or far. Some were convoluted and hidden deep in oneself, but the array could draw them out and amplify them until they disturbed the mind.

Xue Xian felt his brow pulse upon hearing the words "inner demon." What haunted him wasn't the moment his tendons were ripped out on the coast of Huameng in Guangdong, nor was it the desire to make the person who did it pay in blood. What the illusion had conjured clearly was not linked to either of those things. He couldn't have been ensnared by the array just because he wanted to escape the stone chamber.

If it wasn't because of those things…then it could only have been because of a person. And the only one in the illusion with him was Xuanmin.

This was also why Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang had mysteriously disappeared, while Xuanmin remained. *He* was the inner demon the array had drawn out. Perhaps the inner demon hadn't been so strong, or perhaps the flaw had been too obvious to him, so he'd managed to break free.

Xue Xian's expression changed several times before it settled into an icy calm. He tossed the dying man to the ground and wiped the bloodstains from his hands. The man was truly on the verge of death, but for whatever reason, he still clung to a sliver of hope—although his eyes were unfocused, they held a trace of malevolence.

"What are you plotting?" Xue Xian asked, remembering the man's earlier rambling. "If you confess now, I might let you live another hour. It

won’t take much effort for me to figure it out, but if you insist on being stubborn, I’ll have to do it myself. Then you won’t even get an hour.”

The man on the ground coughed violently. Each breath sounded like it might be his last. Xue Xian wondered if the man could still hear. Either way, he showed no intention of responding. He might have simply lacked the strength.

Xue Xian wasn’t surprised. He mentally unraveled the threads, trying to figure out what this man on the brink of death had clung to as he made his last stand.

What would a dying person desire most? Nothing more than someone to save them, or a way to escape.

The former was unlikely in this situation. Even if someone came for him, they would have to get past Xue Xian first. With the delay, the man on the ground would die before leaving the room.

The latter was a fantasy. If being rescued was no guarantee that he would survive, could he escape on his own? He was bound to die with things the way they were. How would he find his way out? Unless…

Unless he had found some method to make his life last a little longer.

Xue Xian’s expression darkened: It seemed this man really was plotting to extend his life.

Everyone had their own fate. If you brought yourself to the brink of death, you couldn’t just tack on an additional stretch of life. So-called life extension usually came in two forms: exchanging lives or binding lives. The first involved using various methods to swap someone else’s life for one’s

own—ultimately, one lived, and one died. The second involved binding one's life to someone else's, so the two lived and died together.

The first seemed more sinister, while the second seemed harmless. In reality, the second was dangerous, just less direct. The former traded lifespan for lifespan, while the latter traded fortune and blessings for lifespan. One divided lifespan, while the other divided fortune and blessings. It could also transfer misfortune, and there might have been other harms as well. In the end, the two methods were equally bad.

Since this man was plotting to extend his life, there must have been someone whose life he intended to exchange with or bind. This matched the nonsense the bastard had been spouting earlier: *"No matter. There are still three more."*

Xue Xian felt a dark cloud looming over his head.

He was not one to owe favors. This trait had its pros and cons. The good was that he had lived for so many years without any debts. He'd never owed anyone anything for long or gotten entangled with them. The bad was that, without connections or interactions, he had no close relationships. This might have been a disadvantage for ordinary people, but to Xue Xian, it seemed the most comfortable way to live.

Still, regardless of whether they were close or not, Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang were people Xue Xian had brought along with him. In times like these, they could be considered "his people"—not to mention Xuanmin. To plot against his people right in front of him… This person really had a death wish.

Xue Xian's eyes flickered as he recalled the sound he'd heard the moment he'd broken free from the inner demon. It was a sound like

lightweight beads—lighter than gold or agate beads and not as crisp—falling to the ground. Xue Xian suspected that was the key to the life extension.

Time was running out, and he didn't have the patience to wait for the scoundrel to come to his senses and explain what he'd meant. Xue Xian remembered what Shitou Zhang had said earlier: This person had taken him to a mountain and watched him carve seven stone locks and two tomb guardian beasts.

"Let me ask you, do you know about Fentou Island in the middle of the river in Wolong County? There's a tomb chamber beneath it where over three hundred restless souls were trapped," Xue Xian said coldly, grabbing the man again. "Do you think those trapped souls would recognize you if they saw you?"

The coughing man hunched in on himself, as if he still feared the consequences of his own misdeeds even in his near-death state. He gasped heavily a few times, like the memory was fighting him, and barely croaked out, "I…"

"Now you want to talk? Sorry, I've lost my patience," Xue Xian interrupted. He cocked his head to one side. "Just wanted to confirm how to make you suffer."

With that, he flipped his hand, and a set of iron tags with names carved into them appeared in his palm.

"The resentment of these trapped souls runs deep. Even if their remains were properly buried, it would take at least a decade for their grievances to dissipate, especially when they see their enemy."

He lowered his voice and flicked his finger in the air. A red mark appeared on the dying man's forehead. He suddenly grew alert, as if he had been revived by a miracle.

"Suffering should be endured while awake," Xue Xian said. He scattered the iron tags onto the man.

The tags were thin and no larger than a thumb, and there were no more than twenty or thirty. They could easily have been brushed off. Yet the man seemed crushed under the weight of a mountain. His body turned stiff and pressed against the ground, and he was unable to move no matter how much he struggled.

Then, as if he had seen something terrible, the man's eyes widened. He let out a blood-curdling scream.

"Ahhh, go away! Don't come near me!" He screamed and screamed, his body writhing, as he cried and begged for mercy. It was a complete, unrestrained breakdown. "Please! I beg you, ask me anything! Ah, go away —take them away—make them *leave*!"

Perhaps the man's desperate cries were too piercing. Lu Nianqi and Shitou Zhang, who'd been lying on the ground, both twitched and woke up with a start, as if they'd hit the ground in their dreams.

Plop! Plop!

Something else fell to the ground, twice in succession.

Shitou Zhang gasped for breath. His eyes were unfocused as he stared into the void. It took him a while to snap back to reality.

"What happened? What just happened? How did I fall asleep in a place like this?"

He looked at Lu Nianqi and saw that the aloof but reliable young man seemed to have just woken up as well. That made the situation even more bizarre.

“Hey, Xiao-Qi, did you have a dream too? What did you see?” Shitou Zhang asked.

Lu Nianqi’s face was pale, and he looked utterly lost. After a long pause, he said in a rough voice, “I saw Shijiu, but it didn’t quite feel like him—”

“Ahhh, please, *please*!”

Before Lu Nianqi could finish his sentence, the man’s frantic wails cut through the air again, scattering some of the lingering turmoil from the inner demons.

“What’s wrong with him?” Lu Nianqi asked Xue Xian, his voice full of suspicion.

Xue Xian frowned and glanced at Xuanmin, who still showed no signs of movement, then back at the man on the ground.

“I’ll give you a moment to catch your breath,” he said. He flicked his fingers. “Now, tell me again—what exactly did you do?”

The agonizing pain of a hundred ants gnawing at the man’s body subsided. He gasped for breath, his face drenched in tears and snot. When he answered, it was in a weak, disjointed manner.

“I can’t die… I can’t… Used the Life-Sharing Spider… The array…”

Xue Xian’s eyes narrowed. “The Life-Sharing Spider? How do we break it?”

“The array… If the array is broken, the spider dies… If the array remains unbroken…” The man’s unfocused eyes fixed on Xuanmin. “Just a moment… Pierce the skin… Draw blood…”

While the man spoke, Xue Xian was already rummaging through Xuanmin’s clothes, searching for something.

“Leave a blood mark…then…”

Found it!

Xue Xian spotted a faint red dot forming on Xuanmin’s neck. Without hesitation, he pulled aside the collar and instinctively pressed his lips to the mark, which resembled a bruise.

“Sucking won’t work. Once it’s inside, it can’t be sucked out,” the man said. He had regained some strength, perhaps due to the lingering effects of Xue Xian’s earlier conjuration. He even managed to speak coherently now.

In a state of manic clarity, the man stared at Xuanmin’s neck and Xue Xian, who was bent over it. His dull eyes flickered with a hint of madness. “It’s done… It’s useless now! It’s already done. As long as the blood mark sprouts spider legs, I’ll live again.”

He sighed and studied his own hands, which seemed to have regained some vitality.

Xue Xian lifting his head and wiped a trace of blood from his downturned mouth. The skin around the blood mark was red from his sucking, but the mark itself remained, just as the scoundrel had said. In fact, it seemed to be spreading, as if the “spider legs” were beginning to emerge.

Just as a thin red line began to extend from the blood mark, Xue Xian froze.

It looked familiar.

He glanced at the red mole at the junction of Xuanmin's neck and jaw. Every time Xuanmin fell into a state of confusion, that mole would sprout several blood vessels, exactly like the "Life-Sharing Spider."

The new blood mole on Xuanmin's neck abruptly stopped after extending two blood vessels. It began to retract, and eventually, the mole itself disappeared.

Before Xue Xian could understand what had happened, he felt Xuanmin stir. He watched as Xuanmin slowly opened his eyes and shifted to look at him.

"Awake?" Xue Xian asked.

For a second, Xuanmin raised his hand just an inch.

"We were tricked. We fell prey to an inner demon," Xue Xian continued. His expression was complex as he recalled what he'd seen earlier.

He didn't notice Xuanmin's raised hand drop back down. The monk closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he was fully awake.

He looked intently at Xue Xian.

Xue Xian suddenly realized how compromising his position looked. The mark he'd left by sucking on Xuanmin's neck was still vivid on his skin.

No, let me explain!

But the damned Life-Sharing Spider had already vanished without a trace. Without evidence, what was there to explain?

Whether Xue Xian managed to explain himself or not, Xuanmin was not the kind of person to react too strongly. He might even turn his face away to spare Xue Xian some embarrassment and pretend nothing had happened. As for what Xuanmin was really thinking, that was beyond Xue Xian's control. It would make little difference.

Besides, Xuanmin had already paraded around in the inner demon. What was there to explain? So what if he left a mark? It wasn't like he could take it back now!

Xue Xian's expression shifted through a myriad of emotions before he finally gave up and sat up straight, acting as if nothing had happened. He eyed Xuanmin as if accusing *him* of being the one at fault.

"Why are you even looking at me?"

Xuanmin's body temperature was scorching, making the coolness of his neck all the more noticeable. Even though he hadn't seen what had happened, he reached up and touched the offending spot.

Before Xue Xian could see any change in Xuanmin's face, the dragon guiltily turned away, hardened his expression, and sneered at the man on the ground.

"Didn't you say it worked? How do you feel now? Because from where I'm sitting, you don't look like you're about to live."

"I'm alive, I'm really alive, I can live…!" the man babbled. "Look, I can move my fingers now!" As he spoke, he clenched his fists a few times. Indeed, he seemed to have regained some strength.

Xue Xian's next words shattered his delusions.

"Stop showing off those chicken claws of yours. Do you really think that strength comes from the Life-Sharing Spider?" Xue Xian smirked crookedly. "I just needed you to stay conscious a little longer so you could suffer. Look—"

He tugged lightly at Xuanmin's collar without turning his head. "Your precious blood mark is gone, let alone any spider legs. You'd have better luck dreaming. Besides, if it had really worked, you wouldn't be the one lying on the ground shaking right now."

At first, the man seemed unwilling to believe it, but when he processed the last part, he had no choice but to accept the truth. If his plan had really worked, wouldn't the difference between him and Xuanmin have been more obvious?

The man went limp on the ground, his eyes wide—completely broken.

"It seems your Life-Sharing Spider can't compare to a flick of my finger," Xue Xian said. His tone was glacier-cold.

The man's wailing cut off. After going through so much, he finally seemed to accept reality. He crawled over and grabbed Xue Xian's foot, which was dangling off the table.

"Save me, please, save me… I can't die, I shouldn't die! I-I was supposed to have merit. How can I die?"

Xue Xian was thoroughly disgusted by the man clinging to his foot, but his legs were numb. He couldn't pull away. Xue Xian turned to Xuanmin for help instead.

“Bald donkey, could you—”

Then he remembered his guilt and swallowed his words.

He was prepared to resign himself to enduring the man’s touch when Xuanmin moved. With a wave of his hand, the man clinging to Xue Xian’s leg was tossed a full ten feet away, and Xue Xian’s leg was gently set back onto the table.

Xue Xian blinked in shock.

Wait, I could have done that myself. Why did I freeze up at the critical moment? He blamed his temporary stupidity on the heat from the inner demon, which must have fried his brain.

Now wasn’t the time to dwell on that. There were more pressing matters. He leaned toward the man on the ground.

“What were you saying earlier? That you ‘have merit’? Have you asked those iron tags if they agree? You trapped three hundred restless souls in a tomb, condemning them to eternal suffering, and you have the nerve to talk about merit?”

“You… Your lordship doesn’t understand!” The man, desperate to live, suddenly switched to addressing Xue Xian as “lordship” whenever he could, which just made Xue Xian scowl. “Your lordship really doesn’t understand. The section of the river near Wolong County has always been treacherous, with hidden whirlpools and strong currents. If a major flood were to hit, both banks would be devastated, and countless lives would be lost. Next spring and summer, Wolong County will face a once-in-a-century flood. I set up the Flow of a Hundred Soldiers to prevent that disaster.”

The man looked up at Xue Xian and patted at his own chest as he spoke. “Saving hundreds, thousands, even millions of lives—isn’t that an act of great merit? How could I deserve to die? I should live to save more people from suffering. How do I deserve death when useless people are still alive?”

The stone chamber fell silent. Xuanmin’s eyes flickered, as if he had remembered something, but he composed himself quickly. He frowned at the man on the ground.

Xue Xian remained expressionless for a moment before letting out a chilly laugh. “Why do you deserve to die? Let me ask you this. Has the flood happened yet?”

“N-next spring and summer,” the man repeated. He thought Xue Xian was questioning the accuracy of the prediction, so he kept defending it. “The person who divined this disaster is a master. He’s never been wrong before. There’s no way he miscalc—”

Xue Xian cut him off impatiently. “Even if it’s true, I’m asking you, has the flood happened yet? Have lives been lost?”

“Not yet.” The man shook his head, trying to speak again. “But—”

“But people have already died,” Xue Xian said, holding up three fingers. “Three hundred people. The flood hasn’t even arrived, but you’ve already claimed three hundred souls. Not only did you deny them a peaceful life, but you also refused to let them rest in death. Did you even ask for their consent? Did they agree to be sacrificed for your so-called Flow of a Hundred Soldiers?”

“There’s always a price to pay for changing fate. Three hundred lives

for millions—”

“So it’s a good deal, is that it? You treat human lives like commodities and weigh them on a scale?”

“I-I understand,” the man said, as if he still believed he had some conscience left. “That’s why I carefully selected beggars and disabled soldiers. Beggars spend their days on the streets, and they often die overnight from exposure. They’re of little use compared to ordinary people. As for the disabled soldiers, they’re already half dead, missing limbs, unable to work or make a living. They’re just a burden.”

Xue Xian was almost amused by the man’s audacity.

“You know, I think you’re a burden too,” he said. “Look at you now, lying there like a piece of rotten meat and barely clinging to life. How about this. I’m planning to set up an array of my own, and I only need one life. How about I use yours? Maybe in a hundred years, I’ll save millions of people.”

The man was speechless.

Of course, Xue Xian wasn’t bored enough to save anyone, nor was he compassionate enough to lay any souls to rest. He was doing all this because, in his mind, dying without remorse or understanding of one’s wrongdoings was a form of release. For someone like this man, it was more fitting to be denied that, and to die full of guilt and fear.

But before that happened, there were still questions that needed to be answered.

“Let me ask you one more thing,” Xue Xian said. “Where did the dragon bone buried in your tomb come from?”

“It was a gift from a master. The bone made the array more effective,” the man said cautiously.

Xue Xian’s patience was wearing thin. “I hate it when people beat around the bush. How about I send you to the underworld right now, huh?”

“No, no! I’ll talk, I’ll talk… The master—he’s a sorcerer. I’ve followed him for years. My blood is spiritually potent, far more effective for setting up arrays than ordinary methods. He’s taught me many things. I’ve been with him since I was eight or nine, studying for over a decade. He’s really a master, though he forbade me from calling him that. He only gave me a peachwood waist pendant passed down among his disciples. Though I no longer follow him, we’ve stayed in contact. He warned me about the great flood coming to Wolong County’s part of the river and helped me set up the Flow of a Hundred Soldiers with his men.”

A sorcerer again? Xue Xian recalled the sorcerer mentioned by Scribe Liu. It seemed they were one and the same. Since the dragon bone had come from him, this sorcerer was almost certainly the man they sought!

“To set up your array, you kidnapped three hundred orphaned souls. To carve statues, you bound people to desolate mountains. To amplify your schemes, you buried a dragon bone. You and your shifu are cut from the same cloth. You’re both vile to the core,” Xue Xian jeered. “What’s your shifu’s name?”

Having sensed that Xue Xian’s true target was his shifu, the man tried to bargain. “I-if you spare me a few more years—”

Before he could finish, Xue Xian waved his sleeve and slammed the man against the wall. “Then don’t speak! I’ll find him anyway!”

“Songyun!” the man gasped. “His Daoist name is Songyun!”

That was what he needed. Xue Xian moved to strike, but Xuanmin pressed a hand to his wrist.

“*What?*”

“I have questions,” Xuanmin said coolly. He turned to the man. “Have you seen me before?”

The question froze Shitou Zhang, Lu Nianqi, and even Xue Xian.

Weak and wobbling, the man squinted at Xuanmin. He shook his head. “N-no.”

Xuanmin frowned. “Then why flee?”

“My master foresaw that I’d face a calamity. He told me to head this way for a chance at salvation. I heard birdsong from outside the fog-covered forest, so I took an antidote and crept in. A black bird saw me covered in blood and showed me the path.”

How did this bald donkey raise a bird that aids criminals?

Yet Xue Xian felt an odd relief at hearing this. At least Xuanmin and the man shared no past.

Another matter came to Xue Xian. He eyed Xuanmin’s neck. “Where did you get the Life-Sharing Spider? From your sorcerer shifu?”

“Y-yes. He said it came from Langzhou,” the man admitted. He was unable to pinpoint Xue Xian’s mood and too afraid to bargain further.

“Langzhou…” Xue Xian repeated.

He flipped through the book on the table with Xuanmin’s annotations to find the words: *Langzhou’s Mount Xia*.

This wasn't the first time he'd heard of this place. Earlier, when discussing Xuanmin's amnesia back in the inn, the monk had mentioned waking in the mountains of Langzhou. Had the pre-amnesia Xuanmin discovered the Life-Sharing Spider's secrets and found a way to break the spell, which had led him to Langzhou?

Ultimately, their trip had been well worth it. Their previous jumble of disjointed clues had lined itself up and become clear. Everything now pointed to one person—the sorcerer—and one place: Langzhou. Having learned these two things, Xue Xian saw no reason to linger. He raised his hand and clenched his fist, leaving the resentful energy from the iron tags to engulf the man.

The man screamed.

Xue Xian watched impassively. With a curl of his finger, he drew a wisp of white smoke from the man's body. The spiritual energy he'd infused into the man to keep him conscious was no more. As the man wailed in agony, he sank back to the brink of death. Enveloped in resentment and feeling his end closing in, bit by bit, the man broke down again. Tears streamed down his face as regret coursed through him. He didn't want to die.

"If it…you…what would you…would you do?"

The words were vague and fragmented, but Xue Xian understood: *If it were you who were faced with a flood, what would you do?*

Defying fate always came at a cost.

Xue Xian watched the man in silence. He almost deigned to answer, but then he decided that this person was fundamentally different from him.

The man wouldn't understand, no matter how Xue Xian explained. It would have been a waste of words.

When the man's breath stilled at last, Xue Xian gathered the iron tags and turned to Xuanmin.

"Have your bird flap us back up and out of here," Xue Xian demanded, extending his arms.

It was a clear request to be carried, though from his tone, he sounded more like he was collecting a debt. Xuanmin stared back at Xue Xian. For some reason, the monk hesitated, though he eventually reached out and lifted Xue Xian off the table.

Xue Xian didn't get it. Xuanmin usually acted like carrying him was no more than carrying a sack, so much so that he'd grown accustomed to it. Why the sudden hesitation? Had Xuanmin been affected by the inner demon?

The answer hit Xue Xian when he was back in Xuanmin's arms.

The monk's body temperature was even higher than before, so hot that Xue Xian felt uncomfortable. Even the hand that had been cool earlier was now scalding.

And why had this happened?

Because when he'd nibbled on Xuanmin's neck, Xuanmin had come into contact with his dragon saliva once again.

What a pain!

A single dose of dragon saliva was potent enough for the average person, but for someone like Xuanmin, it wasn't too bad—it just required some basic restraint. However, the effects of a second dose were doubled,

and the average person would probably be pushed beyond the brink. Even Xuanmin had been drenched in sweat at night the last time it happened.

And now, a third round…

Though Xue Xian couldn't fully empathize with what Xuanmin was going through, he imagined that it was probably beyond what most people could endure. It might even be life-threatening. Xuanmin was still suppressing the effects of the dragon saliva within his body, but something was definitely going to blow. His body temperature alone was enough to burn someone to death.

Well, we have to find a way to deal with this nuisance, since the dragon saliva is mine.

Xue Xian's conscience stirred as he wondered about a solution. He wasn't sure what to do, but whatever it was, it shouldn't be done in a crowded place. It was best to have no one around, as this wasn't something that was appropriate to discuss with others.

"Since this house is heavily linked to you, don't you plan to search it top to bottom for clues about your past?" he asked Xuanmin.

Xuanmin *had* planned on doing so, so he made a low hum of agreement.

Xue Xian nodded at Shitou Zhang and Lu Nianqi. "You two head back first, lest Jiang Shining and the others worry. The bald donkey and I will go through this little pagoda again."

With his poor eyesight, Lu Nianqi made no objection. But Shitou Zhang hesitated. He wanted to stay and help because this "little pagoda"

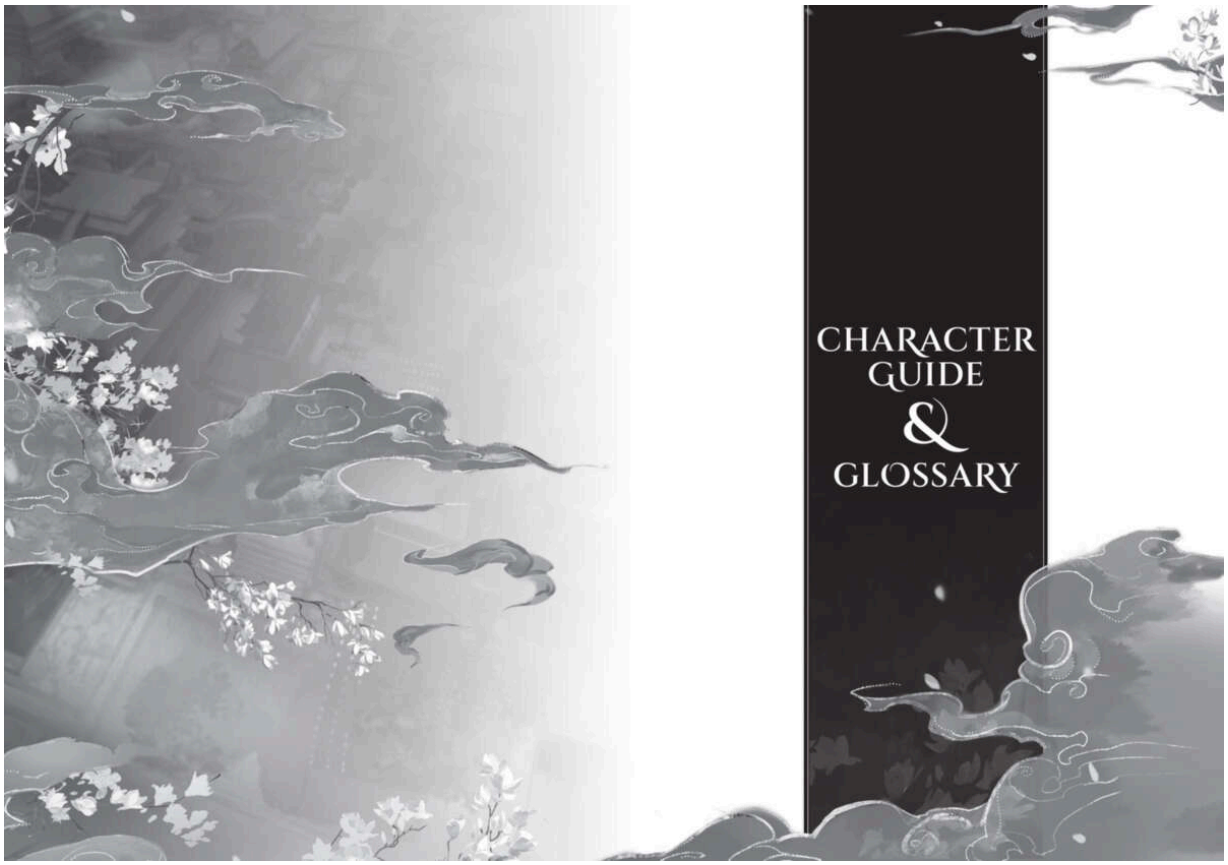
wasn’t exactly small. However, after some thought, he decided that these wise ones must have had their reasons, so he didn’t press further.

“All right, we’ll head back to the Fang residence first,” he said with a nod, and then they were off.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

Copper Coins

VOLUME 3


CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

XUE XIAN 薛闲 ("IDLE"): A dragon that was left partially paralyzed after being maimed.

XUANMIN 玄悯 ("PROFOUND COMPASSION"): A wandering monk with a mysterious past.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

XUE XIAN'S PARTY

JIANG SHINING 江世宁: A scholarly ghost who perished three years ago in a fire.

LU NIANQI 陆廿七: A young man who inherited divination abilities from his deceased older brother, Lu Shijiu.

SHITOU ZHANG 石头张: A talented, spiritually sensitive, but unrefined stonemason.

QINGPING COUNTY

AUNT CHEN 陈婶: One of the caretakers of the Fang family pharmacy.

UNCLE CHEN 陈叔: One of the caretakers of the Fang family pharmacy.

FANG CHENG 方承: Jiang Shijing's husband and the Fang family pharmacy's doctor.

JIANG SHIJING 江世静: Jiang Shining's older sister. Calls him A-Ning.

XINGZI 杏子: A young woman who works at the Fang family pharmacy.

WEN VILLAGE

DELIANG 德良: The scar-faced leader of a traveling opera troupe.

THE BENEVOLENT LORD XU 徐大善人: The earthbound spirit of a wealthy merchant.

THE COURT OF IMPERIAL SACRIFICES

CHIEF DIVINER 太卜: A woman responsible for the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' divinations.

CHIEF RITUALIST 太祝: A man responsible for the Court of Imperial Sacrifices' rituals.

NAME GUIDE

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

LAO-: A friendly prefix meaning "old."

Family

JIEFU: A term of address for one's brother-in-law, specifically the husband of one's older sister.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

Courtesy Addresses

GONGZI: A respectful address for young men, originally only for those from affluent households. Though appropriate in all formal occasions, it's often preferred when the addressee outranks the speaker.

LAOYE: A respectful address for the master of a household.

SHAOYE: A respectful address used by servants for the young master of the family.

SHIFU: A respectful address usually meant for one's master, but can also be used for Buddhist monks and nuns.

GLOSSARY

DIVINATION: Chinese fortune-telling covers a wide variety of techniques and methods. Generally, diviners use their understanding of qi, the five elements, yin and yang, and astronomy to calculate and make observations.

The art of geomancy or **feng shui** involves the diviner calculating and manipulating the qi flowing through the area through different layouts and orientations. The balanced and harmonious flow of energy within a location is believed to impart powerful benefits.

With physiognomy and **palmistry**, the diviner reads a person's fate and state of health through their facial features, complexion, body, palms, or bones.

EXORCISM: Both Daoist priests and Buddhist monks could be tasked to remove spirits from a location, but their methods would differ. In contrast to Western and Daoist exorcism techniques, which focus on forcefully expelling or even destroying the spirit, Buddhist monks sought to help the spirit move peacefully to the afterlife, known as "transcendence." Even now, Chinese funerals will hire the services of monks, who perform rites to guide the deceased onwards.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how

blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

Another central concept in traditional Chinese medicine is that disease arises from an imbalance of elements in the body caused by disharmony in internal functions. For example, an excess of internal heat can cause symptoms such as fever, thirst, insomnia, and redness of the face. Excess internal heat can be treated with the consumption of foods with cooling properties, such as lotus tea.

YIN ENERGY AND YANG ENERGY: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite and contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and difference. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish whichever energy they lack.

About the Author

Mu Su Li is a signed author on Jinjiang Literature City. A writer of the post-90s generation known for her wild imagination and whimsical style, she loves fantasy and believes words can hold warmth. She hopes that every story she writes brings comfort and joy to her readers. Her signature works include *A Certain Someone*, *Panguan*, *Global Examination*, *Three Hundred Years of Longing*, and more.

Footnotes

Chapter 20: Plague County

[1] Used by servants to respectfully address the young master of the family.

[2] A respectful address for young men, usually of high status.

Chapter 21: The Benevolent Lord

[3] Laoye is a respectful address for the master of a household.

[4] Jie is a term of address for one’s older sister, or an older woman one is close to.

[5] Jiefu is a term of address for one’s brother-in-law, specifically the husband of one’s older sister.

THIS ADVENTURE IS DOWNRIGHT HAUNTING!

The egotistical dragon Xue Xian and the memory-wiped monk Xuanmin are still stuck together—and so are the many mysteries trailing in their wake. Their ghostly companion, Jiang Shining, seeks peace for his departed parents, but first he must find the last of his living kin. Meanwhile, Lu Nianqi, now empowered and burning for answers, is determined to uncover the truth behind the deadly tomb on Fentou Island that took his brother's life.

The party's quest takes a bizarre turn when they hitch a ride with a troupe of theatrical ghosts—only to end up in a cursed village overrun with restless spirits. The deeper they dig, the more the threads begin to tangle...and point toward a single origin.

Why does everything seem to circle back to Xue Xian's downfall? And what role does the enigmatic monk at his side truly play? One thing's for sure: If they don't kill each other first, they just might uncover the truth.

SET IN ANCIENT CHINA, A RAGTAG TRIO SEEKS TO RECLAIM THEIR FORMER GLORY IN THIS ROLLICKING DANMEI ADVENTURE!

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